

ace
science
fiction

Was he there to teach Earth—or to rule it?

THE PRODIGAL SUN

Philip E. High



The Prodigal Sun

Philip E. High

Chapter One

THEY HAD NOT named the age, in truth there were few words to describe it. The world had known times of plenty and times of famine, ages of freedom and years of dictatorship. There had even been brief, if localized, periods of near perfection but this was not one of them.

This period took the worst, threw them together and made quite sure that nothing good got in.

It was not really the world's fault, having been pitchforked into it.

Mankind had just concluded its first interstellar war but the word "victory" was purely relative.

True the enemy was flat on its back and quite helpless but Earth had come out of the encounter on all fours. Today, five years after the enemy's unconditional surrender, Earth was still licking its wounds and unable to climb to its knees.

The race was sick, sick of its leaders and sick of each other. Its gut ached from over-doses of expediency and its sinews creaked with the bitterest cynicisms.

Whether the men in the long conference room were products or victims of the age is an academic question and wholly irrelevant--it didn't make them any nicer. They were mean, hard men, uninfluenced by any consideration save advancement in their wholly personal rat-race.

This was the age of dog-eat-dog, here the cheap chiseler, the terrorist and the extortioner blossomed like flowers on a refuse heap.

First there was General Statten, a harsh little man with beady eyes and the face of an irritable peanut. The General wore a smart uniform, impressive rows of ribbons and decorations but he had flown a desk in an impregnable H.Q. two thousand feet under the Andes. He was a political general, a brilliant organizer with a singular ability for discrediting those immediately above him. Station's climb to the top had been a tour-de-double-cross.

Facing him was Dowd, the industrialist, who had, during the years of sorrow, acquired a financial empire without parallel in human history.

Dowd was insatiable, having grown drunk on power, he had developed an everlasting thirst for more. He would have liked to possess the world but Kaft wouldn't let him.

Kaft represented the secret police. Kaft kept secret files but neither could bring the other down without his own collapse. Dowd had insinuated himself so deeply into the financial sinews of the race that he could not be removed without the collapse of the economy.

Kaft, on the other hand, held those revealing files and his untimely death would bring them to light. Both took great care that the other stayed alive but they hated each other venomously.

It was difficult to understand, even in war, how a police state had arisen from a loosely democratic government. People don't turn round and say:

"Let's have a secret police," or do they?

In an all-out war manufacturing plants are switched from luxury goods to war production and, inevitably, there are shortages and out of shortages grows the black market.

In war the best food goes to the fighting men and there is rationing for the civilian population. A thousand and one petty criminals rush forward to bleed off this flow of supplies and the black market grows. Beside it spring up subsidiary rackets, grafting on government contracts, phony committees preying on the patriotic, forged papers for the draft-dodger.

The government has to counter these activities under emergency powers and specially trained forces have to be created to deal with civil corruption. Maybe, after all, people do turn round and say: "Let's have a secret police."

Kaft was it. He had borrowed the techniques of all the police systems which had preceded him and added a few of his own.

After a twenty-five year war it had got so bad that people were afraid to be silent in case their lack of words be interpreted as sullen resentment against existing order. They were also afraid to speak.

Kaft with his pinched pink senile face and scraggy neck. A man with a mouth like a coin slot in a public vending machine, listening and biding his time.

"I don't like it." Rickman rolled the cigar from one side of his mouth to the other. "It's all very well for Dowd to rub his hands and dream of extending his empire but this could be dangerous. In my opinion we could do without our visitor. In my opinion this man is a louse but he could also be a menace."

He took the cigar from his mouth and pointed it at them. "I'll concede that his knowledge is valuable, immensely valuable, but getting at it is another thing. A jewel encrusted bomb is just as dangerous as the other kind and digging out a few of the gems is a poor return if the damn thing blows your head off before you've finished."

"Bombs have been de-fused before now," said Dowd, stubbornly.

"Bombs we understand."

"Even bombs we don't. The Vrenka had a lot of gimmicks in the war but we licked most of them."

"It's a danger to the whole race." There were rare occasions when Rickman teetered on the brink of political honesty. "This louse sat out the whole war on a neutral planet and we're going to welcome him back as a V.I.P. Hell, he may not even be Duncan, he might be a damned alien or, at the very least, a 'plant' for the Mattrain. All this red carpet stuff is being laid on because Dowd wants to bleed him of advanced technologies and, I repeat, it's damned dangerous, best keep him away."

He thrust the cigar back in his mouth and chewed at it angrily. "We could sell out the race for thirty technical blue prints and Dowd could be chief Judas."

Dowd sighed and smiled twistedly. He did not look at the politician but addressed the others. "When our public spirited friend draws on his meager biblical knowledge I must confess I am impressed, however--"

Dowd paused and smiled meaningly. "Mr. Rickman should take time off for self-analysis because, believe me, he is highly skilled in the art of implication." He looked at the other directly. "Mr. Rickman would like others not only to arrange the crucifixion but to wash his hands as well.

What our political friend is trying to 'say, without, of course, implicating himself is: 'Let's knock our visitor off as soon as he arrives.' "

"I protest!" Rickman was on his feet, flushed and angry.

"Order! Order!" Hodges the chairman banged his gavel noisely. "The purpose of this meeting is procedure"

"Gentlemen, please." Kaft rose, his timing, as always, was perfect. "Mr.

Rickman's apprehensions are not only understandable but commendable."

He paused. His genius for soothing insincerities was well known but seldom failed to convince at the time. "It is quite true that Duncan may be a 'plant' for the Mattrain or, at the very least, working for their espionage organization but we are not quite fools."

Duncan will be under constant surveillance and"--he smiled slyly--"I have detailed a special bodyguard to 'protect' him. After the first few public receptions Duncan won't get near enough to anyone or anything to be dangerous.

"One question," General Statten's little eyes were hard but alert. "I have received information that Independent News has appointed a permanent contact. Thanks to its blasted charter rights we couldn't block the move."

Kaft smiled thinly. "We didn't try, too obvious. Let him report until public interest wanes."

Rickman said, "Who is this contact and what's his job?"

Kaft leaned down and extracted something from a briefcase. "I have his file here. His job is to write up a day by day account of Duncan and his reactions to Earth. If we handle this carefully we may learn

quite a lot."

"And the contact himself?"

"A man named Mark Gaynor, he's been screened of course. Has a flair for factual reporting but fortunately an extrovert and without subtlety. An excellent war record incidentally, organized and personally lead four successful commando raids on Vrenka bases in the latter stages of the war. Decorated twice, achieved rank of major..." Kaft closed the file slowly.

"A hard, tough man but excellent for our purpose. If we have to rub out Duncan in a hurry we have a scapegoat conveniently at hand."

"Sounds as if this goat could butt back and hard," said Rickman, savagely.

Kaft smiled. "Well make quite sure he butts the man we choose, thank you."

"We're going to look this prodigal over personally?"

"But of course, the interrogation of such a man is not a task for subordinates. We must handle this with subtlety, at first he must feel he is among friends."

The transfer ship hung ready in space, withdrawn-looking and somehow timeless. A dull black pear-shaped blob flung carelessly and rather incongruously against an unwinking mist of stars.

At a distance, but close enough to be pointed, four bulbous and heavily armed cruisers stood ready and waiting.

During the war the Mattrain, despite the tactical position of her Empire directly between the two warring races, had remained

uncompromisingly neutral. It was not a stand which had endeared her to the human race--surely one humanoid people should help another. Worse, since first contact, the Mattrain had brusquely cold shouldered all attempts to establish friendly relations. Keep away and stay away had been her only response to countless suggestions of trade, cultural exchanges, pleas for medical assistance by which Earth sought to establish profitable relations with a people several thousand years ahead in culture and technology.

It was this technical superiority which had prevented both races from seizing the Mattrain worlds for their own advantage. Both were acutely aware that the Mattrain could have beaten both races to their knees in a matter of days.

Again there were rumors... No one quite knew where these rumors originated but put together they spelled out something unpleasant. It was said that the Mattrain had something. No one knew quite what it was but, boiled down, attacking the Mattrain was suicide for anyone.

There were a million guesses as to what this something was but no one had put forward anything definite. Only one man might know, only one man might have the answer. The man who had sat out the entire war on those neutral Mattrain planets--a man called Peter Duncan.

The Mattrain ship, when it finally arrived, was so small it was almost an insult. Here was no dignity, no ceremony, no sense of the appropriate.

The cruiser commanders had the uneasy feeling they were being laughed at. The Mattrain pilot was probably making mocking and slightly vulgar signs with his fingers. All this pointed show of force and they'd sent that, a tiny bronze-colored cube no bigger than a ground car.

They would have liked to have done something about it. They would have liked to have shown this cock-a-hoop flea cage just what they felt about it. Their resentment was made worse by chagrined realization that this same flea cage could probably beat hell out of the lot of them.

The Mattrain ship touched the side of the transfer vessel, hung there briefly then drifted away. Watchers saw it boost suddenly to a killing gravity, exhale sudden brightness and flick abruptly into hyper-drive.

Transfer was over.

The transfer ship was beaming vision and sound but viewers on Earth caught only a brief glimpse of a fair-haired smiling man emerging from the transit lock. He was lost almost immediately in a grim reception committee of white coated and be-masked medics. They hustled him quickly away and the white doors of the medical laboratories slid shut in front of the tele-mikes.

Viewers had a long wait; medical science was taking no chances.

The experts began on the assumption that he was non-human and worked backwards. Fortunately they had his natal charts but it made them no less thorough. They checked his blood, respiration, retina pattern, finger prints and his sexual organs. They measured, weighed and analyzed the contents of his bowels, stomach and bladder. They ran off charts on reflexes, glandular reactions and the results of deliberate bruising and cuts. They removed fragments of flesh and skin, scrapings from the teeth and hair from his head and body. Slowly, very slowly, they became reassured.

At the end of the sixth grueling hour the Chief Medic removed his medical mask. "I have no reasons to suppose you are not human. Our tests give reasonable grounds for assuming you are the original

Duncan." The Chief Medic was not an ungracious man, just a frustrated one suffering from a sense of anticlimax. Somehow the whole business had turned out to be routine and wholly mundane.

There was nothing startling about Peter Duncan. A slim quiet man with fair, rather untidy hair. Certainly he seemed almost unnaturally healthy and well-muscled but, apart from that, a man you might meet anywhere.

Wide but not striking blue eyes, a good strong chin, a long amused and faintly mocking mouth--hell, the man was ordinary.

"Nothing ever happens to me" thought the Chief Medic, savagely. He had spent almost the entire war in a military hospital a thousand feet underground and was suffering from a sense of frustration. He'd never seen the war, only the beds, the lines of casualties tossed like unwanted carcasses, one after another, onto the brightly lit operating tables.

"You may dress. Food will be brought as soon as you are ready."

Belatedly and with some effort he added: "Good luck, Duncan." The "By God, you'll need it" showed only in his eyes.

Outside the tele-mikes were still 'live' and waiting. One of the news circuits was filling in the time by giving a resume of past events.

It was a particularly cloying broadcast deliberately slanted and predigested for the lower intelligence brackets and, therefore, coated with an unreal intimacy. It was, however, reasonably accurate: "No one will ever know what happened to the Mackley. Loading and preflight checks had proceeded normally. She blasted out of orbit dead on schedule with one hundred and eighty-three passengers and a crew of thirty five."

"She was never seen again."

"Her last routine message was received five days out of orbit but after that her fate is one of the mysteries of space."

"We do know, however, that a Mattrain vessel recorded a disturbance, possibly an explosion on her instruments and went to investigate."

"The aliens found only drifting metallic dust but, nonetheless their instruments were recording distress signals. They immediately centered on these calls and found single life-craft."

The announcer paused dramatically. "Within this vessel the aliens found a man child, a six-month-old baby boy, the sole survivor of the ill-fated Mackley."

"Whether the child's mother had a premonition of danger and carried the baby boy to safety before the Mackley met her end we shall never know. Perhaps there was prior warning but that, too, will never be known..."

"To give the Mattrain their due, they immediately notified Earth and arrangements were made to return the child to its own race."

"Fate, however, decreed otherwise. Before the negotiations could be completed Earth's Empire was invaded by the cone ships of the Vrenka.

And, in the years of terror which followed, the Mackley and the baby boy were forgotten."

"Only today, thirty years after the Mackley's disappearance, does the survivor return, no longer a baby but a mature man--a man named Peter Duncan."

There was a carefully timed pause. "What can we expect of this man Duncan, raised on an alien planet by alien foster parents? Here is a symbol denoting the unknown. A human being, yes, but with an alien background and an alien education. A man whose mind must reason differently to our own. A man to whom our way of life, our hopes, dreams and aspirations may be totally incomprehensible."

The announcer lowered his voice dramatically. "Why does he return now to his own race? We must remind ourselves that he was in no great haste to return when our resources and strength were strained to the limit."

"Again, what does he bring us? Does he come with the blessings of a superior technology or as an agent of an alien race. Is he friend or foe?

Does he despise or pity us?

"All these questions must be asked and, when answered, proved beyond shadow of doubt.

"Although today we killed the fatted calf for the returning prodigal, shall we one day deplore his return and the efforts we made to make him welcome?"

Duncan sat down to the solitary meal which the announcer had described as the fatted calf. Earth had done her best but a calf?

There was syntha-steak, medium rare, mock onions and pseudo-tubers.

There was a dessert of lab-fruit and custard-concentrate.

Unhurriedly he finished the meal, fully conscious that alert eyes and

large numbers of instruments were recording every movement he made.

The rate his fork traveled from his plate to his mouth was, no doubt, the subject of intense study. The number of times he masticated his food would probably become the subject of Interdepartmental debate.

He smiled to himself inwardly. Might as well give them something to gasp about.

He touched the delivery button and watched the servo eject the carton.

He extracted a cigarette, flicked off the plastic tip and watched the tobacco light on contact with the atmosphere. Carefully, and with obvious deliberation, he leaned back in his chair and inhaled deeply.

He almost spoiled the effect in an effort to fight down a cough but somehow he succeeded. The synthetic tobacco in no way approached the perfection of Mattrain Kelsna but it would serve as a reasonable substitute until...

Chapter Two

DUNCAN WAS MET at the ferry port by a group of bleak-faced men posing as a reception committee.

A minor government official shook his hand with obvious reluctance and read a typed speech of welcome.

Precisely twelve seconds were allowed for the tele-mikes to get a close-up of him then the reception committee hustled him into a waiting vehicle and slammed the door.

"Make yourself comfortable," said a dry voice before he had landed on the seat.

Duncan said: "Who the hell are you?" and sat down.

"I'm your bodyguard." He was a strangely flat-faced man with a button nose and pale cold eyes.

"Bodyguard?" Duncan leaned back and crossed his legs.

"That's what they call it. I protect you against possible assault or alternatively, protect the people against you—I make myself plain?" He took something from his pocket and held it up. "In case you're unfamiliar with our technology this is officially known as a C-type restraint weapon or, to the vulgar and uneducated, as a club gun." He spun it deftly in his hand. "It's tuned to the nervous system and, to the recipient, feels like a numbing physical blow. Note the advance adjustment button close to the butt. Pressure on this not only knocks the victim cold but clean out of this world." He smiled faintly. He had a long curiously puckered mouth which looked as if it had once possessed a zip fastener. "If it's of any interest I'd be really grateful if

you started something."

Duncan looked at him thoughtfully. "You have a name I take it, apart that is, from the obvious dirty ones your attitude call to mind?"

The other's mouth thinned, carefully he put the gun away.

"The name is Hengist." He extracted a single cigarette from his breast pocket, flicked off the plastic tip and studied the slow curl of smoke. "Tell you something?" He hung the cigarette from the corner of his mouth. "If there's one thing I hate above all else it's a comedian. Don't make me burst out laughing, foster child."

Duncan shrugged indifferently and looked out of the window.

The vehicle was now leaving the ferry port by the main gate, flanked by a huddle of storehouses and administration buildings.

Despite the distance from the city, large crowds had gathered which were being held at bay by contingents of uniformed police.

There were jeers and catcalls as the car appeared. The minor government official, Duncan noticed, had prudently chosen alternative transport and another exit.

The crowd pressed forward and the police pushed them back again.

Over to the left a group of bearded men bore placards and crudely painted notices on long poles.

ALIEN GO HOME. DUNCAN YOU'RE NOT WANTED.

Beyond were further examples,' ranging from

MATTRAIN SPY to

DUNCAN THE FUNKHOLE SPECIALIST.

The vehicle crawled towards the center of the square where the official 'rise' shaft was marked out in yellow.

The crowd surged forward again and was pushed back.

The placards swayed and tossed like the standards of a failing army.

There was a sudden weakening in the restraining lines of police and the crowd burst through like a flood.

"Up! Never mind about the official shaft." Hengist was speaking into the vehicle-mike, the gun in his hand.

There came a soft whine of repellers as the concealed auto-driver kicked in the emergency circuits. The vehicle began to rise swiftly as the crowd seethed forward.

"Claw them down!"

"Get the alien!"

Fingers fastened on the lower section of the open window and a woman's face appeared. She might have been pretty once, in a drab kind of way, but now her face was twisted with hatred.

"You alien bastard," she said.

Hengist hit the fingers with the butt of his gun. The woman moaned gaspingly and her face disappeared.

He leaned out, then closed the window. "She only fell a couple of feet, unfortunately."

Duncan glanced downwards. The vehicle was now rising like an express lift and the sea of pink upturned faces and shaking fists was rapidly becoming meaningless.

Hengist sat down and returned the gun to his pocket. "Seems you do need a bodyguard; one could hardly describe that little rough-house behavior as marked affection."

Duncan was placing a lighted cigarette between his lips and inhaled deeply before he spoke. "You're asking me to accept that lynch-opera as an expression of public opinion? Really! In this day and age one hint of anything spontaneous and the secret police would be walking on peoples' faces."

Hengist's eyelids drooped unpleasantly but, for the first time, his expression held grudging respect.

"Duncan, you're a fool." His voice, although by no means friendly, was no longer actively hostile. "In this day and age the wise man plays it stupid." He sighed. "All right, the exhibition was not for you but the tele-mikes and the watching public."

"My opinion didn't really matter?"

"Off the record, no." He sighed again. "You get an all-out war and you get the race squeezed down tight for maximum production. Comes peace and there's no outlet for all that drive and energy. The ruling classes have got used to their power and don't want to let go. Worse they daren't. If they ease up, too much freedom will rise up and overwhelm them. If they press down too hard the whole damn planet can blow up in their faces.

Ticklish, power in a bottle, hold it down, ease it off, needs a lot of skill to strike a balance."

"Where do I fit in?"

"Politically you're God's gift to the policy of divide-and-destroy. Get the people divided against each other, for and against, alien spy versus superman bearing blessings--follow?"

"Ahead of you. Incidentally, in the interests of your own safety, aren't you being a little indiscreet?"

Hengist smiled with one side of his mouth. "Not really, we're not registering spy rays at the moment. In any case, with your background and intelligence you would have reasoned it out for yourself soon enough.

It's just possible you might have aired those conclusions at the wrong time later."

"Thank you for your advice and information."

Hengist repeated his one-sided smile. "Don't let it go to your head, foster child, don't let it go to your head." He turned and stared out of the window.

Duncan followed his gaze and saw they were nearing the capital.

Government City was still impressive at a distance but, close inspection revealed that the only remaining beauty lay in architectural line.

It was like an aging but once beautiful woman mercilessly exposed to a brilliant light.

Once it had been a gem, a study in pastels and open spaces. A tinsel of slender footbridges had linked the soaring columns of the buildings like a shining web and translucent plastic had blended the

contrasting pastels into a single beauty, but now... Now the city had bags under its eyes and harsh lines at the corners of the mouth. The pastels were grimed with years of neglect into a uniform grey, the footbridges sagged tiredly or jutted, broken, over the abyss of the streets like twigs from a dead tree.

In the parks and open spaces, overcrowding problems had forced the erection of hideous ten story tenements. They filled every square and open space like brown untidy bricks.

"You think that bad?" Hengist seemed to be reading Duncan's thoughts or perhaps his expression. "You didn't see it as it was, when I was a kid..."

He stopped and flicked the spent cigarette into the disposal slot. "That was a long time ago, maybe it was a dream, but you should see the D.A."

"D.A.?"

"Devasted areas. The Vrenka got into the system twice-- know what pinwheels are?"

"It's a type of revolving firework, isn't it?"

"Correct, the Vrenka had a weapon like that. Imagine a pin-wheel a mile across spinning and slithering around a bare two feet above the ground. They left a trail of glassy slag behind them, a glowing pathway and mile on either side-- pouf! Heat rushed out at head level, doors crashed in and upper windows blew out. The roofs and upper stories of even the highest buildings suddenly went bam, geysered upwards as if a tornado had started on the ground floor and howled its way out at the top..." He let the sentence trail away and shook himself as if suddenly awakening. "There are worse

things than Vrenka spinners, however." He glanced out of the window. "Better pull yourself together, Duncan, we're at the end of the journey..."

The vehicle landed on the roof park of one of the highest buildings which had once been a pastel ivory. Now it was drab and sleazy with neglect. Great patches of discoloration showed on the outer walls and even the gracefully curved windows were opaque with grime.

Inside the rooms and corridors were still lit with a soft artificial daylight but, here and there, were patches of shadow where generating cells were breaking down or had ceased to function completely.

Hengist showed him to a small quiet room with thick carpets, large comfortable chairs and a reception committee.

"Do sit down." Kaft waved him to a chair and went through the formalities of introduction. "Mr. Dowd, Minister of Finance. General Statten, Defense Department and Mr. Rickman, House of Representatives.

You may leave, bodyguard."

Duncan sat, fully aware that the interview was crucial.

Kaft crossed his legs and beamed at him. "You appreciate, I hope, that we cannot issue papers of citizenship until we have satisfied ourselves as to your intentions. You are, to all intents and purposes, an alien and we have the entire race to consider. After all, despite your human origin, your loyalties may lie elsewhere. We feel therefore that we have every right not only to your wholehearted co-operation but also some definite proof of your good intentions. You do understand this?"

Duncan said "Of course," politely.

"Excellent." Kaft beamed again. "I'm afraid we must begin with some rather leading questions. For example, your command of the language. We know it is your mother tongue but you have been away for thirty years and we find your fluency somewhat disturbing."

Duncan crossed his legs, outwardly at ease. "I was given basic instruction by a Mattrain linguist. Later I was provided with a device for tapping Earth's educational and entertainment channels."

"You understood this--er--device?"

"I knew how to operate it, not its basic principles."

"So the Mattrain can calmly tap our communications at a distance of sixty light years." General Statten was scowling and obviously uneasy.

Duncan smiled faintly. "At double that distance if necessary."

Kaft leaned forward. "Tell me, Mr. Duncan, do you regard yourself as a member of the Mattrain race or as a human being?"

"As a human being, obviously. The Mattrain are six fingered, have golden skins and their average height is seven feet."

"But you owe them allegiance?"

"I owe allegiance to all intelligent life."

"Really?" Kaft leaned back, his face expressionless. "This is Mattrain philosophy?"

"It is."

"You surprise me. The Mattrain allowed us to fight a war of near-annihilation and made no attempt to aid us."

"The Mattrain are of the opinion that the Vrenka also represent intelligent life. Further that intervention on their part might cause lasting enmity between all three races."

"This is the official opinion?"

"The general opinion."

"I find you evasive. What was the official opinion?"

"As I was not a confidant of the administration I do not know."

"Sweet, isn't he?" said Rickman in a harsh voice. "Everything smooth, pat and nicely rehearsed." He half rose from his chair. "I suggest you're a damn spy."

Duncan smiled. "The Mattrain are perfectly capable of obtaining information without my assistance. I have already told you they can tap your communications."

"Perhaps they visualize an addition to their Empire with an outwardly human agent to run it for them."

Duncan sighed. "If the Mattrain had wanted Earth they could have taken it over before the human race discovered the wheel."

"Thank you, Mr. Duncan." Kaft smiled, his manner friendly and disarming. "You do appreciate the need for this questioning, don't you?"

Oh, do help yourself to cigarettes, you'll find a servo-dial in the left arm of your chair."

He waited until the other had a lighted cigarette, and was leaning back comfortably in his chair. "Now, Mr. Duncan, you apparently answered in good faith and with absolute frankness. Unfortunately, however, the human word is no guarantee of one's real intentions and there are a large number of factors to be considered yet. For instance, and this question may reflect public opinion, having sat out the war on a neutral planet, do you now return to us as--a poor relation? Further have you any proof of your good intentions?"

Duncan blew a casual and rather pointed smoke ring. "You mean will I pay my rent?"

"One could phrase the question that way."

Duncan looked at him thoughtfully. "And another way--having paid my rent, have I brought any gifts for the family?"

"Mr. Duncan, you anticipate me." Kaft's voice was still smooth, he had learned self-control the hard way and patience was one of his primary weapons.

"I'm glad we understand each other." Duncan's smile held faint impudence. "Perhaps together we can work something out. How about a new plastic as a start. It can be stamped, carved or suitably shaped for prefabricated construction prior to final processing. Once processed, however, it has ten times the tensile strength of supasteel and will stand a temperature slightly in excess of solar heat." He looked thoughtfully at General Statten. "It would be ideal for military purposes as the substance resists all known radiation levels."

"What about manufacturing costs?" Dowd was leaning forward, mouth clamped. "We're not economically equipped for complicated

auto-factory construction."

"A normal auto-factory could be adapted in three days and a high percentage of the necessary chemicals extracted both from now worthless manufacturing by-products and normal city refuse."

Strangely it was Kaft who raised objections. "I would describe your suggestion as a tit-bit, Mr. Duncan." Dowd opened his mouth but Kaft waved him quickly to silence. "Oh yes, I agree, such a substance would undoubtedly revolutionize our economy but considering its source, it's barely a token. I object to being fobbed off with the equivalent of a string of beads. This offer smacks of a 'gift to the natives.' You can do better than that, Mr. Duncan."

Duncan looked him up and down with deliberate insult. "You're old, Kaft, very old. At a guess the next scheduled anti-agastic shot will be your last. How would you like to be forty again? How would you like to live a thousand years?"

Kaft was caught on a weak spot and, for a moment, showed it. He licked his lips, his eyes suddenly bright and furtive, but he said: "Really, we're not fools, Duncan."

"Give me three years and I'll give proof."

"We ought to kill him." Rickman shouted suddenly. He sprang to his feet. "My God, can't you see what he's doing?"

"Sit down, you bloody fool." Kaft's voice was soft and menacing.

Rickman paled and sat down, muttering.

Kaft turned to Duncan again. "Very well, we will grant you citizenship on conditions and also on the basis of your promises."

"One minute." General Statten's little eyes were bright and calculating.

"If this man has the knowledge he claims what's to stop us squeezing it out of him?"

It was Duncan who answered him. "You could try that but it would do you very little good. Knowledge needs interpretation, for example the basic construction of an automatic weapon would be of very little use to a man whose conceptions extended only to bow and arrow."

Kaft's eyes narrowed suddenly but when he spoke his voice was still smooth. "We are not so crude as to apply General Statten's suggestion literally. We have, however, other means, you could be programmed."

Duncan laughed softly. "Sorry. My foster parents know your methods and were alarmed for my safety. They took precautionary measures."

Kaft nodded. "I anticipated that so shall we get down to basics. We simply cannot afford to keep you for purely charitable reasons. We must, therefore, demand adequate payment for our hospitality."

Duncan ground out his cigarette. "Bluntly, give or else. I must say it took you the hell of a time to get to the point although, candidly, I expected something like this."

"Now I'll have my say and be damned to you." Rickman glowered at them from his chair. "My God, he's hooked the lot of you with the oldest bait in the world—offering you the thing you want most. Can't you see he's not even worried, he knows he's going to win in the long run."

Kaft shrugged. "Rickman you're becoming hysterical."

"I have been, Kaft, but not now. No, I no longer regard him as a spy or even a tool of the Mattrain." Rickman rose. "In my considered opinion our friend comes in the most dangerous guise of all--an angel of light. I think he comes as the almighty do-gooder, a reformer with a mission, take a look at history and you'll find there's nothing more dangerous."

"Oh, yes, he'll grant blessings, no doubt about that, but God, you'll pay for them, you'll pay and pay and pay." Rickman turned abruptly and strode out of the room.

Chapter Three

"THE PRESS." Gaynor leaned casually against the wall. "I have an authority to interview Peter Duncan."

Hengist looked him up and down. He saw a dark-haired, compact man with a strong chin and the white patch of an artificial skin-graft covering his left temple.

"Raise your hands." Hengist frisked him as a beginning. "All right, stand over there in the examination cabinet." He flicked the switch as the other stepped inside. "Yes, yes, your meager personal possessions match the list and seem innocuous. Move a couple of inches to your left."

Hengist was leaning forward slightly, studying Gaynor's stomach and bowels gruesomely exposed in the cabinet screen. It never paid to take chances. A couple of almost invisible pills and you could regurgitate a micro-weapon from the stomach or, alternatively, eject it from one of the body orifices.

He made slight adjustments and examined Gaynor's head. He had often found devices concealed in the nostrils and, once, a virulent poison concealed in artificial flesh behind the eyelid. Desperate men took desperate measures and one of the rare resistance groups might want Duncan dead.

"Have you finished?" Gaynor sounded resigned.

"Near enough, you can step out now."

"Thanks. You missed the mole spot behind my left ear, did you know that?"

"Don't worry, any trouble and I can hit it at a hundred feet."

"Thanks for the warning." Gaynor looked about him.

"When I was a kid my grandmother had a rather fascinating toy. It was a plastic egg, inside that was a smaller egg and so on down the line until you got one the size of a pin head. Getting in here was like that, first one security officer, then another and so on down the line." He stopped and grinned.

"All right," said Hengist sourly. "You've made your point." He frowned.

"Do you make a habit of baiting security officers?"

"Only the pompous types." Gaynor turned away.

"My God, man, don't you realize I could have you programed for that?"

Hengist was more startled than angry. "Why the hell do you do it?"

Gaynor turned, his eyes thoughtful, then he said, "Bravado, I guess." He frowned. "I'm a returned veteran, you see, got used to sticking my neck out. Someone needles me and I needle back, it's reflex."

Hengist scowled at him but there was faint, if grudging, respect in his eyes. "Don't stick your neck out too far or too often, soldier boy. Believe me there's always someone waiting with a chopper."

"Thanks for the advice. May I ask you a question?"

Hengist was suddenly bitter again. "I have no authority to stop you.

What do you want to know?"

"Well, you know why I'm here, how do I get my story out?"

"You're not taking up residence you know, a permanent news contact gets one hour each week. As to your story, we supply the recorder. After you've done your column we check it. If it passes the check, which is unlikely, we'll see that it's forwarded with the censor's comments to your editor."

"Well, thanks. By the time it sees daylight Duncan could be dead."

"He may be dead now," said Hengist in a hard voice.

Gaynor shrugged slightly and turned away. They were all the same these security officers, stamped out from a machine, killing instruments, with slick provocative tongues and a superficial education. Softly spoken menacing cheapjacks, prefabricated units in a gigantic instrument of intimidation.

He dropped into the nearest chair and thought, "Hell, that's not bad.

Got a sort of contemptuous roll to it. Wish I had the nerve to write it up."

Pointless, of course, pointless writing and pointless suicide. Bravado he'd told the man, but it wasn't true; it was sheer nervous reaction. In point of fact the whole set-up scared him cold and this dangerous insolence was the last twitch of a dying courage. It had been easier back in the war where the danger was obvious and the issues simple. This danger back home was insidious. It crept up on you from behind and gradually sapped your nerve. He wasn't as bad as poor old Mendon, the subeditor, yet, but it was coming, he could feel it closing in. The friends you made who suddenly disappeared, the wartime comrades who moved from their homes and left no forwarding address.

He forced his mind grimly away from the subject and tried to concentrate on the coming interview. Be damned funny wouldn't it if Duncan started asking him questions. On second thoughts, however, not so funny. A casual question could be damned awkward these days and the only answer one could give was the polite official evasion. A man with Duncan's background should see through a smokescreen like that in a couple of minutes. Suppose, for example, Duncan said: "What was the war all about?"

He'd have to give the official story of course. The story of a race of monsters descending on Earth's peaceful Empire. Empire of all five worlds and they'd been hanging onto two of those with their finger nails. The 'trouble was, of course, Earth wanted a stellar empire that looked and sounded like an Empire. When the exploration vessels had found the sixth they jumped on it with both feet. Survey--if you could call it that--was superficial. Hell, it was an E-type world, you could breathe there. There was no micro-life the bacteriologists couldn't handle. Number six here we come.

Too late it was discovered that another stellar race had set up bases on the Southern continent.

"Perhaps we should have fought anyway," thought Gaynor, tiredly. "We found each other mutually repulsive and we both thought we owned the galaxy."

As it happened show of force led to show of force and the inevitable provocative incident. Earth destroyed the Vrenka bases and the enemy retaliated by clobbering hell out of world number two of the Earth Empire.

It had been a ferocious war the early boasts of knocking the yellow-bellied monsters clean out of space within a month were soon

forgotten. The Vrenka fought back with savagery and, it must be admitted, incredible indifference to odds.

Gaynor frowned to himself. There was no doubt the Vrenka had guts and, much as the propaganda sought to detract the point, a rigid code of ethics. The Vrenka never killed the unarmed or wounded and, if possible, picked up survivors, but hell, in a straight battle...

What had they got out of it all? While they had been fighting, a new and corrupt priesthood sat on its backside in a funkhole insidiously taking over the Earth.

It was a government of brutal realism. It made no claims of virtue or leading the world to better things. This is the new feudalism: conform or else. There was no father-figure, no goal, and worse, no hope.

In the upper echelons of the administration the jockeyings and double-dealings made the intrigues of the Borgias look like pleasant and innocuous games for very young children.

"God," thought Gaynor, suddenly, "I've got to watch it or, one day, perhaps drunk, all this will come tumbling out."

He, himself, had no cause for complaint. The authorities had not only granted him second-class citizenship, but had bent over backwards to find him suitable employment. The move was, he suspected, a deliberate policy of appeasement. Keep the returning veterans happy until such a time as we can deal with them as individuals.

Gaynor found that his hands were clenched nervously. One day they'd come for him. He'd seen enough and heard enough to know what would happen.

There would be no violence, no threats, no shouting, no rubber truncheons.

The two quiet callers--there were always two--would seem to vie with each other in unnatural politeness: "If you would be good enough to accompany us, sir;" or "The district Supervisor would be grateful..."

No one knew quite what happened after that. The unfortunate man or woman left the Security building apparently normal and without worry, sometimes, even, looking happy and relieved. When one paid a visit the next day, however, the apartment would be occupied by a stranger. There would be no message and no forwarding address.

Oh, yes, you knew what had happened then, your friend had been programed and, if you were wise, you departed hastily lest you be branded as an associate.

No one of the normal population quite knew what programing was. You knew it was something the psych boys had cooked up. You knew it was a kind of conditioning. But after that you could only guess.

Where did they go? There were no concentration camps, but yes there were the untouchables, the lowest strata of society, but these, apparently were free or at least they walked the streets like other men.

There was another story he had heard. On programing you were given a little black book, a little black book with the word "Programme" on the cover. You clung to the book as if its possession meant more than food or drink or the air you breathed. Cynics referred to it as "The Bible of the Damned."

Gaynor shook himself irritably. This was the way you sapped your own nerve. This way you got like poor old Mendon.

He glanced across at Hengist, comfortable in another chair, legs crossed, cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth.

Security agent, classification so and so, officials for the protection of. In another age he would have been a nasty little gunslinger, selling his skill to the highest bidder. In a way he still was--a sharpshooter employed to protect the persons or possessions the Administration considered valuable. Gaynor wondered briefly if he had ever stood up to anything bigger than a man.

He said suddenly and with uncontrollable bitterness, "Tell me, Mr.

Hengist, do you boys notch your guns or have you an official Scoreboard?"

Hengist removed the cigarette from the corner of his mouth. "Another comedian. If you like you can write out your own death warrant and I'll sign it. Tell me, Gaynor, are you psycho or something? You seem to have a death wish."

"I think we may regard this as satisfactory." Kaft did not rub his hands but his manner was definitely unctuous. "Your laboratory, together with your list of equipment will be ready within three days. You have expressed a wish to work unsupervised and we will honor this agreement. Further, although you will be confined to the laboratory and accompanying living quarters, we will grant you all the concessions of a first-class citizen. For every contribution made to our society one or more, of the present restrictions will be relaxed. If you fulfill your promises, in five years you will be a free man in the highest strata of our society."

He leaned back in his chair and made a steeple with his fingers. "No doubt you regard our terms as harsh, perhaps virtual blackmail, but you must look at this matter from our point of view. To all intents and

purposes you are an alien and perhaps hostile to us all. We had first, therefore, to protect the race and, second, satisfy ourselves as to your good intentions. We could only do this within the framework of an agreement and an agreement could only be drawn up if we had something to trade."

Duncan looked at him with faint contempt. "In the past they said 'Your money or your life' and had done with it."

Kaft shrugged depreciatingly. "In this troubled age expediency is essential to survival."

Dowd said, "How do we know he won't use that equipment to make a super weapon or something? He could be working for himself."

"He would have been much better equipped to conquer us from the transfer ship in the beginning. If Mr. Duncan has the technical knowledge of his foster parents such an attack would have been easy." He touched a sense plate. "Bodyguard."

Hengist appeared almost instantly. "Sir?"

"Conduct our guest to his suite. You will treat him with the respect due to a first-class citizen while bearing in mind that he is still restricted."

Hengist's pale eyes flickered in Duncan's direction with faint contempt but he bowed politely. "This way, Mr. Duncan, please."

He led the way down a corridor, and a door on the left opened automatically at their approach.

Duncan found himself face to face with a compact dark-haired man who looked as if he was living under a tremendous strain.

Hengist performed the introductions. "This is Gaynor, sir, a reporter.

Authorization has been granted for a weekly interview, subject of course to your approval." Gaynor held out his hand. "Glad to know you." Duncan took the hand, smiling faintly. "Well, that is nice, that's the first genuine demonstration of good will I've met."

Gaynor grinned. "I'm open-minded. You're a human being until proved otherwise."

Hengist paused in the act of removing a loose cigarette from his pocket.

"The reporter is also a psychiatric case, sir. He suffers from a death wish."

Gaynor shrugged it off. "I can't help needling him, but he isn't one of the pick-up creeps, just a gunslinger."

Hengist smiled faintly. "Don't push your luck, copy boy, although we both know your days are numbered I could anticipate the date by a couple of years."

Duncan said, "It sounds as if I'm in a nice world."

"You're in custody but you probably know that already." He sighed. "So am I for that matter, the difference being that you and I know it. Our gun-bearing friend has still to find it out."

Hengist shrugged. "You see what I mean, Mr. Duncan? A man talking his own head into a noose has, as I say, a death wish."

Gaynor straightened. "To hell with you, but you've helped me reach a decision. I had the choice of sweating it out or living it to the full while it lasted. I prefer the latter."

Hengist shrugged. "Could be very brief, not even a swan song." He changed the subject abruptly. "A drink, Mr. Duncan?"

"Coffee, please. Does our friend rate a drink?"

"No, sir, not unless you say so."

"I do say so." He turned to Gaynor. "How can I help you?"

"Well, I'm here to write your personal story. How you react to Earth, your tastes on this and that. This is a week by week picture, a close-up to be read, heard or depicted in illustrations according to the taste of the reader."

"And then?"

"It will be slanted one way or another at the behest of the Censor."

"In short, you supply the bones, what is built round them depends on current or local policy."

"Aptly expressed." Gaynor sipped the mineraly derived alcohol Hengist had dialed for him. "I shall write it up to justify myself but it will be torn down again."

"I suppose you would like to ask me some questions?"

"The procedure," said Hengist, "is for you to submit your questions in written or recorded form in case they touch upon improper or classified subjects."

Gaynor said, "Hell."

Duncan grinned at him sympathetically. "You seem to have chosen a

singularly frustrating subject for your column. However, you are in a position to listen and learn in other quarters."

"I don't follow you."

"Fellow prisoners--you referred to yourself as a prisoner--might also be a source of news."

Hengist interrupted them. "Your hour, and that includes your waiting time, is up, Gaynor."

The reporter rose. "Well, that's that. Thank you for your time, Mr.

Duncan see you in a week."

"We can hardly wait," said Hengist, sourly.

Gaynor grinned at him insolently. "Me, too," he said, ungrammatically and with deliberate insult.

Hengist watched the door slide shut behind him. "There goes a damn fool," he said.

"You don't like him?"

"I don't know him, but I dislike what he represents. He was big in the war. They gave him a high rank and decorations. He can't forget it and he can't adapt." He sighed. "He's a kid whistling in a dark street to show how brave he is."

"You didn't answer my question--you don't like him?"

"A man in my position can't afford affection. It's a survival question."

"Then he was right, you are a prisoner. You, too, must obey or else--"

conform or else."

Hengist shrugged. "When it worries me, Mr. Duncan, I'll think about it."

"When it worries you, Hengist, it will be too late."

Outside, in the street, Gaynor's mind was occupied with the recent interview. There was nothing startling about Duncan. Outwardly he seemed a quiet modest man and yet... It was nothing he said even if one admitted being overawed by his background and influenced by prior knowledge. Hell, let's face it, there was power behind that easy friendliness, not merely superior intelligence, but something indefinable which radiated outwards. A kind of super vitality which made one feel only half alive. Yes, power and purpose. Duncan had reasons for everything, his remarks seemed casual but thinking back...

What had he meant by other prisoners? Gaynor had the feeling that the remark hinted at something more than friends or associates. What other?

Gaynor realized he had reached his destination and was about to step on the slow band when the answer came.

He let the main door of the news building slide past without attempting to reach it. Other prisoners, of course there were other prisoners. Had Duncan meant that, and if so, why?

He fumbled a packet of cigarettes out of his pocket and extracted one absently. Was the man a thought-reader? No, he hadn't given the subject a thought for months. Could he read one's hidden thoughts?

The train of thought stopped abruptly as the news angle occurred to

him. What a story, if only they would let him write it.

Gaynor, as Kaft had once remarked, had a flair for factual reporting. He had discovered the gift on a particularly boring patrol during the war.

He'd been a junior officer then and recorded a few impressions for amusement. Later, on impulse, he had submitted the tapes to a news syndicate which, to his surprise, paid him for them and asked for more.

In the last two years he had developed a nose for news and here, surely...

He could head the column "A Tale of Two Planets" for example and-- but they'd never let him cover it. The mere suggestion would probably bring a reprimand from Censorship not to mention acute interest from Security which he would prefer to do without.

He shrugged angrily, nearly tossing away the unlit cigarette in a gesture of frustration.

No, damn it, no. It wasn't treasonable and, God, the subject had never been touched. Why not try?

Chapter Four

THE CENSORSHIP DEPARTMENT took a long time, but delay, Gaynor realized, was inevitable. The department was a bureaucrat's Utopia. The place was packed with complicated legal mechanisms and almost literally festooned in red tape.

The effrontery of the application, however, gave it a boost which allowed one of the duplications--no one else dared endorse it--to appear on Kaft's desk within three days.

"Yes," he said, thoughtfully, "I think we can allow this." The application did, in fact, fit in ideally with his present propaganda policy and he was irritated to realize that it was an angle he, himself, had overlooked.

Gaynor opened the official envelope when it reached him and was shaken. He had not expected the application to get past the first censor and had expected, at most, an official reprimand, yet here...

At the top of the pages was the usual photograph and identification details and below, in heavy print:

The bearer is an accredited news representative. An application to visit Camp Six, for the purpose of interviewing a prisoner is hereby approved.

Signed...(A. Kaft)

Supreme Director, Internal Security Forces.

Lightly dazed, but determined to act before anyone had a change of mind, Gaynor made his way to the roof park and signaled a taxi.

"Camp Six, official park."

The taxi made a clicking sound: "Prohibited area," said the recorded voice primly. "Have you an authority or, if not, an alternative destination?"

Gaynor almost thrust the authority through the taxis sense-plate.

"There's your authority, you mechanical creep." He waited impatiently as the vehicle's instruments scanned the official form. God, how these security programed taxis got him down. In his mind, he was sure they were nothing more than embittered mechanical old maids. He wished they understood the language he used to them and would answer back if only to serve as a safety valve for his own pent-up emotions. Unfortunately, you could shout "louse" or far cruder epithets at them all day and all you would get back would be: "Destination not listed."

The taxi door slid open. "Approved. If you will kindly enter."

Camp Six was situated some twenty miles beyond the city limits and prudently clear of the main air corridors. The surrounding countryside had been stripped, not only of cover but of all vegetation down to the bare rock. In the center of this desolation the long low buildings of the camp lay like blind brown bricks.

"Mr. Gaynor." The reception officer was polite but the private soldiers had drawn weapons. He accepted the authority and submitted it to test.

"In order. If you will come this way, sir, the commandant would like to see you."

The commandant was less polite. He was a big, paunchy man

sprawled untidily in a huge overheated office.

"So you're the newsman." He did not bother to remove his feet from the desk or invite Gaynor to sit down. "I hope you know what you're doing."

He bit at the end of a cigar and spat the stub at the disposal slot. "I won't take responsibility, you understand that." He puffed noisily at the cigar until it was burning to his satisfaction then pointed it like a weapon. "You could get killed. You could have your head torn from your body."

He paused and seemed suddenly to lose patience. "Why the hell can't you look through a screen and have done with it? People like you are just out to make work and anxiety for others."

He touched a button on the arm of his chair and glowered at Gaynor. "A guard will show you to number four. I don't propose issuing special instructions for your safety, if you're idiot enough to go in there alone that's your worry." He returned the cigar to his mouth. "Some of you people could do with a little preliminary instruction, some of you could have done with some war service, you don't know what these blasted things are like."

A guard came and conducted Gaynor through what seemed endless corridors to a long tunnel divided into cells. The door of each cell carried a combined sonic and recognition lock and would only open to a special password which was changed in the guardroom at hourly intervals.

Behind the doors in the high windowless cells were the prisoners or, in terms of propaganda and expediency, the hostages.

The hostages were not human or even humanoid, if they resembled

anything on earth at all it was a spider, but then only at a distance.

On close inspection the oblong headless body was chitinous like that of a beetle, an impression heightened by twin wing cases on the upper part of the back. The hostages had long since dropped their wings in their evolutionary climb but the wing cases remained.

To the front of the body was a mouth, resembling a slot and, above the mouth, two large orange, pupiless eyes of immense intelligence and curious melancholy.

The hostages confounded the scientists by being warm blooded, uncompromising mammals which appeared to follow the pattern of advanced insects. They had twelve long green legs, four of which terminated in club-like feet. The rest were tentacles of incredible dexterity which served them as well, if not better, than the human hand.

In times of meditation--rare now--the hostages opened their wing cases and were transformed. The body within the chitinous armour was covered in a soft yellow down and the interior of the open wing cases was scarlet.

In meditation the hostages looked like exotic scarlet blossoms on twelve slender green stems and almost beautiful except, of course to most humans, the hostages were an ex-enemy--the Vrenka.

The Vrenka race had been beaten almost out of existence but an uneasy victor was taking no chances. Occupation forces were meager and of poor quality, the hostages, holding high positions in the Vrenka culture, were an added assurance of the good behavior of a wholly defeated people.

In Cell Four one of the hostages was asleep and looked like a huge

ball of green string. The Vrenka slept with their legs and tentacles wrapped round their bodies.

Outside the guard manipulated the door, spoke the password and presented his face and badge to the scrutiny of the small recognition screen.

"Takes a little time but you can't be too careful."

He was a small sour-faced man with furtive beady eyes set too close to a long thin nose.

The door slid open and the guard stepped inside. "On your feet, General."

The Vrenka woke and slowly began to stir.

"Hurry it up." The guard drew his gun, went forward and kicked. "What do you think this is--a guest house or something? You've got a visitor, stand up and behave yourself."

He stood back, watching the Vrenka unwind and rise to it's full height of eight feet. "That's better." He jerked the gun slightly. "Know something, Mr. Gaynor, I'm just waiting my chance. One false move, one quiver and there'll be pieces of fried tentacle all over the cell. I'd say it was self-defense, see? Not that the Commandant would care, he hates the damn things as much as I do."

He waved the gun at the Vrenka. "All right, you, get over there behind the restraint terminals." He nodded to Gaynor. "If he's uncooperative just press this button, it will freeze him cold and, believe me, he really hates cold."

"He can understand me?" Gaynor was fighting down a desire to take the guard by the throat and squeeze until his fingers met but he kept

his voice calm.

"Oh, he can understand you, all right." The guard winked meaningly.

"Sometimes he plays it stupid but don't let that fool you. He's quite a little genius in his way. See that blackboard behind him? He can write on that as quick as you and I can speak."

Gaynor realized that the sneer in the man's voice was nothing so much as an admission of inferiority. The Vrenka language resembled nothing so much as an attack of indigestion, a series of burps, rumbles and curiously muted honks. Mankind had never mastered it.

The Vrenkas, on the other hand, not only understood the language of their enemies but had quickly mastered the written word.

The guard made for the door. " 'Fraid I have to shut you in and sorry there's no chair. Make sure the general plays polite host."

The word "general" was the nearest Earth could get to a Vrenka ranking which, literally translated, meant: Combat tactician of extraordinary ability and proved experience. In any case the guard always used the word derisively and with contempt.

The Vrenka moved slightly and extracted some white sticks from a recess in the wall. Then there was a faint scratching sound and the words "Your pleasure?" appeared on the large blackboard.

For the first time Gaynor found himself sweating slightly. The Vrenka had used all eight tentacles and the words in perfect script had appeared almost as quickly as he could read them.

The reporter swallowed, finding himself suddenly at a loss for words. He was conscious that the Vrenka was quite still, his attitude

suggesting patience and polite attention. There was, Gaynor realized, despite the bizarre appearance, an extraordinary air of dignity in the alien's bearing.

Finally, he said, haltingly. "I'm sorry, very sorry. We are not all like the guard." He had the sudden curious feeling he was explaining and apologizing for the whole human race.

Words appeared again. "Thank you. This much we learned in combat.

Am I permitted to ask why you came?"

Gaynor frowned. The question struck him as peculiarly direct and personal and he realized his motives were obscure even to himself.

He said, "Look, I don't quite know. I told myself it would be a good story but that's only part of it..." The sentence trailed away. Was he getting through to the thing or just assuming that he was because it was intelligent?

He said, "I fought against you during the war. I don't hate you. Do you hate us? Don't be afraid to speak the truth, there will be no reprisals."

The tentacles moved: "Intelligence hates not individuals but what those individuals represent. It hates also its own mental picture of its enemy, without this distorted picture combat would be impossible."

Gaynor found the wall and leaned against it, shaken. The printed words were not only disconcertingly to the point but almost a philosophy.

Conquest by the Vrenka had represented, among countless other things, the vilest cruelties because they looked like something out of a nightmare.

Things which looked like that must be cruel--an emotional rather than an intellectual reaction. And, yes, even when you fought a human enemy, you fought the conception in your mind. He might be a kinder and sincerer man than yourself but you ascribed to him all the evil qualities of mankind and fought those.

He said, "Perhaps you have answered all my questions, even those I failed to ask myself. Inwardly, I suppose, I wanted to know if there could ever be understanding between our two races. I think there can, perhaps something approaching friendship, but, to be honest, I would have felt better if there hadn't. I could then have gone on justifying our excesses and our armistice terms. Closing my mind to a lot of other things, I might have slept soundly on the thought that the bastards deserved all they got."

The white sticks moved rapidly. "I am deeply moved but there is so little I can say which would not look unreal or insincere to you. But you have given me hope."

The door slid open. "The Commandant says your time is up, he's including traveling time."

"Right." Gaynor looked at the Vrenka. He did not know if the alien could interpret a human expression but he hoped it could. The melancholy orange eyes met his with--was it understanding or was that something he only wanted to see?

Outside in the corridor he fumbled in his pocket and produced the authority. "I think you'd better take a close look at this, particularly the signature."

He waited for the guard to take it in, then he said, "As you now probably realize from that signature I have a certain influence in high

places. I'd hate to have to report you for ill-treating a hostage."

The guard looked both frightened and angry. "Now look, them damn things--"

Gaynor cut him short. "I happen to know that the experimental section wants one of those creatures for examination. What's going to be said if the exhibit is damaged?"

"The Commandant--"

"The Commandant is responsible for running the camp. When questions are asked guess who will get the blame? They will ask questions of the hostage too, remember."

Color drained from the guard's face, leaving it a patchy white. "I--I just didn't think, sir. I'm very sorry."

Gaynor frowned as if considering the matter. "Very well, I'll overlook it this time but, in the future, watch it. I may have to see this hostage again."

"Thank you, sir. Thank you very much." The guard was servile now, shivering and anxious to ingratiate himself. "Things will change now, really."

"Very well, we'll leave it as a private matter between ourselves, unless, of course, I receive further reports."

"You won't, sir. I promise you."

"Good." Gaynor hoped the man was too frightened to see the sweat on his face. If anyone ever found out that he'd used Kaft's signature in a game of bluff they'd crucify him, they'd-- He stopped himself shivering with an effort of will. Was he mad? He'd taken a risk like

that for what--an ex-enemy, an alien thing with green tentacles? No, no, he hadn't. It was something deeper and more fundamental than that--guilt, racial pride and, yes, shame.

The Vrenkas had fought savagely, violently, ruthlessly but within the rigid framework of their own code of conduct. They had never maltreated unarmed prisoners.

Gaynor was still remembering many things which had happened in the war when he was in the taxi leaving the camp behind.

No, there had been no cruelties, and no atrocities. He'd checked with enough veterans and ex-prisoners of war to prove that.

The aliens had even done their best for the wounded. At first, of course, they hadn't a clue to the human body and a lot of men had died but, at least, they'd done their best. After the first two or three months, however, when the Vrenka medics had more or less got the hang of the human metabolism, results had been good.

Good to what purpose? Gaynor felt anger rise inside him. Six million known human captives and only fifty-six thousand survivors had returned to Earth. The rest had become victims of their own government's war policy.

The new priesthood, safe in its underground cathedrals, had dictated a policy of annihilation and, on their orders, the creaking, scarred and battle-weary fleets had moved in.

There had been nothing to oppose them, no cone-shaped vessel to rise in suicidal glory, no single weapon to declare its token of defense but, nonetheless, they'd kicked the bleeding corpse to fragments.

The cargoes of solar bombs ripped and tore into the helpless body

until even the most avidly Vrenka-hating commanders were sickened.

Cities vanished. Lakes appeared in the middle of deserts and dry land rose out of the oceans. The Vrenka worlds were almost wrenched apart, gouged, cratered and pitted the moon and five and a half million human prisoners were destroyed by human weapons.

Gaynor found he was clenching his hands painfully and forced his mind away from the destruction.

Of course the Vrenkas looked horrible to human eyes. On the raids, for example, bursting into the domes and running head on into a Vrenka was enough to unnerve anyone. In a space suit the Vrenkas looked like a crystal ball sprouting hosepipes, all the hosepipes seemed to hold weapons and the damn thing always charged.

The killing, then, had been impersonal and not a considered execution.

The elementary verities of kill or be killed needed neither philosophy nor justification. There was no time to ask if the creature had feelings like love, loyalty, values, ideals. Did those things exist only within a human form?

Gaynor's thoughts turned to Duncan. The man had obviously come with some comprehensive plan in which he, Gaynor, had perhaps been chosen to play some minor part. There was no doubt that Duncan was far more than he appeared. The security boys were cock-a-hoop now but for how long? In his opinion they had a tiger by the tail and had yet to hear it snarl. Then, of course, history would repeat itself. The little wriggling vermin which had operated the instrument of oppression would weep at the tribunals and protest that they were only acting under orders.

Chapter Five

THE PROMISE OF unsupervised work was less than a gesture on the part of the Administration. As soon as Duncan moved into the approved suite with its attached laboratory, every spy device known to science was employed to keep him under constant observation.

Trained technicians, crouched before the viewing screens, watched and recorded every move he made.

The job, however, was not a sinecure and friction was considerable.

"But what is it?" The supervisor stabbed at the blue-print with his finger. "That, for example, what is that?"

Kaymen, the technician, straightened his back and sighed audibly. He was a big hairy-armed man with a red face, made redder now by suppressed fury. "Mr. Delero, my instructions were to watch and copy.

Within the obvious limitations of the viewing screen I've done that. I've recorded, photographed and blueprinted every move he's made but some of those composites are micro-units constructed in a viewing device which shut us out."

"But surely there's some comparable device by which--"

Kaymen interrupted, "Oh, my God," and sighed again. "Look, there's a normal Fulsum tube here which is wired to this micro-composite and that funny little grid affair on the left but beyond that I haven't a clue to what it's supposed to be."

Delero frowned. "Fortunately he appears in no hurry to finish the

device so we can examine it at our leisure."

"Which would be fine if we knew what it was supposed to do."

"Where is he now?"

"Reading as usual, going through that taped library they've given him."

"Watch it," said Colville from the other screen. "He's turned off the transcription unit and is getting up. I think he's heading for the laboratory. Yes--yes, he is."

They watched Duncan saunter into the laboratory, take a normal electrical switch from a high shelf and begin to connect it unhurriedly to twin wires protruding from the device on the work bench.

"If you ask me," said Kaymen, "he knows we're watching and I think he's making fools of us. In my opinion, Duncan has built a hoax box. I don't think that distorted bird-cage does anything. When he switches it on it will probably play a military march and blow bubbles."

Delero's mouth thinned unpleasantly. "Mr. Kaymen, you are relieved of further participation in this vital investigation. Report to the Project Director immediately. I will continue in your place until such a time as the team is provided with a suitable and, I trust, competent replacement."

Kaymen paled, clenched his fists and backed away uncertainly. "I was only--"

"That is an order, Mr. Kaymen."

The technician shrugged resignedly and wandered away. This would undoubtedly mean a reprimand and declassification. Thank God that

trained technicians were in such short supply that they were treated with a certain latitude. Anyway, declassification and even a reprimand were preferable to working under that petulant little creep.

Delero sat down in Kaymen's vacated chair, satisfied himself that the viewing recorder was working satisfactorily and made minute and unnecessary adjustments to the screen. Duncan, had finished the connection and was fumbling a cigarette from a packet on the work bench. Delero watched him break the plastic tip, place the ignited cigarette between his lips and inhale deeply.

Now! Delero craned forward.

Duncan was stretching out his arm, squinting through the smoke of his cigarette...

He pressed the switch.

Kaymen was halfway through the door when he heard Delero scream.

He turned just in time to see the supervisor arch backwards in the chair and fall out of it.

Four feet away, at the other screen, Colville stood suddenly upright, walked five uncertain steps and pitched forward on his face. His breathing was stertorous and his body twitched unpleasantly.

In the walls the fuses of recorders, detection instruments and spy devices blew out with sharp popping reports. Both viewing screens blurred, suddenly molten and dripped plastic glass. In the corner a thin spiral of black smoke curled upwards from the square brown box of the emergency power unit.

Kaymen heard himself shouting something. The room was becoming

hazy with bluish acrid smoke and his eyes ran with water. Somehow he found the alarm switch, banged it with his fist, tugged at the fire-inhibitor unit and ran for the door...

In his laboratory Duncan exhaled smoke, picked up the cigarette packet and strolled back to his living quarters, his face expressionless.

Hengist, leaning against the wall, smiled twistedly when he entered. "I hope you didn't exert yourself, Mr. Duncan." His manner, although still not friendly, suggested a certain amused tolerance.

"I've done four hours work in three days." He sat down and pulled the reader screen towards him. "I have quite a lot to check on. Oh, by the way, perhaps you can help me. I'm looking for a woman."

"Yes?" Hengist lifted one eyebrow. "I can arrange that. How do you like them?"

Duncan sighed. "Hengist you have a crude mind. I'm looking for a particular woman, a spatial physicist named Martha Deering. Her name fails to appear in this year's index."

Hengist hung a lighted cigarette from the corner of his mouth. "If that's the case, there's only one answer."

"I guessed that." He looked at the other thoughtfully. "I believe you know something."

"If I do, it's not in my own interests to tell you."

"No one will know. No one will hear you."

Hengist laughed, softly. "Would you care to bet on that, Mr. Duncan?"

The caller-screen interrupted him and he flicked a switch.

"Yes--er--yes, sir." His body stiffened visibly. "I'll tell him, sir. Director Kaft would like a word with you, Mr. Duncan."

In the screen Kaft's mouth was more like a coin slot than ever. "Ah, Duncan, sorry to disturb you in the middle of your 'work.' " He paused meaningly. "The truth is, we've had a little trouble here."

Duncan said, "Really?" and looked blank.

"Yes." Kaft was obviously controlling his temper with an effort. "Some of our technicians have been rendered unconscious." He paused, aware that the situation was delicate and chose his words carefully. "We wondered if it was due to some device you were employing in your, experiments."

"My device?" Duncan's expression of innocence was so overemphasized that it was insulting. "Really, Director, you overestimate me. No device of mine could possibly render a man unconscious." He paused as if giving the matter some thought. "Unless, of course, our agreement regarding supervision was, by some technical mistake, infringed. If this happened, then, of course, certain delicate work I was doing might have effected your technicians' instruments." He smiled. "If such an accident did occur the men will regain consciousness within a few hours. For the sake of your staff I hope the faults in their instruments are soon repaired. A repetition might prove fatal."

He waited a few seconds watching Kaft's hands clutch and unclutch.

There were two bright patches of angry red on the director's thin cheeks.

"Was there anything else, Director?"

Kaft swallowed, somehow he controlled his temper. "Nothing at the moment, thank you. Nonetheless, I'm glad we cleared this matter up." His smile as he broke contact was somehow fixed and unreal like that of a skull.

Hengist, his flat face shiny with sweat, said, "No one outsmarts Kaft."

"I have." Duncan grinned. "Incidentally, I have just proved my point. No one can hear you--now about Martha Deering?"

Hengist shook his head slowly as if in disbelief then shrugged. "All right, I remember the case because everyone was talking about it. All I know about programing is that it's a sort of conditioning, but with Martha Deering it wouldn't take. She was a hypno-resistant. I don't know what happened after that, some say they did something to her and let her go but in my opinion they rubbed her out."

"What had she done?"

"She neglected her scientific programme and followed her own line of research." He paused and seemed to make up his mind. "You know, Mr.

Duncan, I could make the same mistake and kill you before I got orders."

Duncan smiled at him. "Why should you? What have I ever done to you, Hengist."

"I've nothing against you personally, Mr. Duncan, but I'm not quite a fool. In my opinion, you're the most dangerous man in the world."

The room was quiet, comfortable and, considering its location, almost peaceful.

Hengist, attending the Sector Director's office for the usual weekly briefing, lay relaxed in the large comfortable chair. God, he'd nearly fallen asleep, in fact, may have. Lucky Ralston always kept people waiting.

The call-screen changed color. "Bodyguard Hengist, Director Ralston will see you now."

He rose, brushed ash from his clothes and stood waiting for the door to open.

Sector Director Ralston was a dark, heavy-shouldered man with a patch of fluffy colorless down in the center of his scalp where a specialist had done a replanting job on a spreading bald patch.

He did not look up from the papers on his desk as the bodyguard entered. "Ah, Hengist, yes. I don't think we need waste your time today.

Your report seems to be quite in order and there are no qualifying questions from H.Q." He looked up and smiled briefly. "Pick up your instructions at central office in the usual way as you leave."

Hengist saluted and left the office, his face thoughtful. At the back of his mind was the nagging feeling he had missed something. Brief interviews were not unusual and he'd had hundreds like today. Nonetheless, somewhere or in some way, something was missing. Or was it out of place?

Outside, in the corridor, realization struck him. He had never seen Ralston smile before.

When he dropped off at the central office for his orders he was surprised to find it almost deserted. The girl in the small outer office

handed him the usual long envelope without meeting his eyes.

"Remote today, aren't we?" He grinned. "When are you coining to live with me?" It was a routine question and he didn't expect an answer.

Her reaction was unexpected. She looked up at him and said, "David-oh, David."

He was amazed to see tears in her eyes.

"You don't have to take it so hard, it was--"

The plastic glass came down in the window before he could finish the sentence.

He shrugged and turned away. He supposed someone had upset her, probably her lover or a superior. It happened. She'd get over it. Lanie was a pretty kid in a frail, slender sort of way, but, like all women, temperamental. Upset them and they simply let fly at the nearest target which, in this case, had been him.

He sighed, admitting to himself for the first time that he had always desired her--not that he intended to do anything about it. Attractive girls didn't get into H.Q. without influence and that influence was male. You could, of course, be magnanimous and attribute the matter to a brother or uncle but experience told you otherwise. A director or supervisor exerted pressure and his mistress was installed in a purely decorative position which was not only above criticism but conveniently accessible.

No, if you tried to make up to the female staff you were not only sticking your neck out but providing your own chopper. One had, therefore, to console oneself with the females security recruited for the benefit of its officers.

He left the building, jumped the moving way, and headed for his apartment. Three hours yet before he need relieve Brade who was "standing in" with Duncan in his absence.

Slowly he became aware, as always, of the noise. The grinding of rollers and worn bearings, the unnecessary whine of individual boost units. He could remember, way back, when the moving ways had run silently. He could remember when there had been parks and trees and secluded green squares where old people had sat quietly in the sunlight.

He remembered the first time he had ridden the ways as a kid. It had been night and he'd been wide-eyed and open-mouthed with wonder. The buildings had been lit from within and glowed like great pastel jewels. And above, the air traffic had danced and darted like a million fireflies.

"I'm thirty-eight," he thought. "This must be the first sign of age, dreaming, thinking back, remembering childhood, recalling the things which can never be again. No parks now, no trees and the old people. Did you feel old at sixty-five?"

The state couldn't afford the support of the aged now, so one night they went to sleep and never woke again. Were they warned? Did anyone tell them? Did they fight sleep, knowing...

Hengist shook himself angrily. That damn man, this was his fault. He'd been right when he told him he was the most dangerous man in the world.

Duncan had something you couldn't see, something you couldn't really sense, yet you knew it was there.. You had a fair idea of Duncan's game, you knew he was a kind of superman or, at least, a

super intelligence. You knew he was playing at being a prisoner, laughing at security and getting ready to twitch the world by the tail but that wasn't the real danger. The real danger lay in the fact that you couldn't hate Duncan, you couldn't be impersonal and that was frightening.

You'd made a pact with yourself to fight down your feelings, never feel anything for anyone because, who knew, the next day you might be ordered to destroy him. Again, your feelings could betray you, slow you down, cause one tiny hesitation and then... Mentally, Hengist drew his fingers across his throat...

Duncan needled you, he made you angry but, whatever he did, you liked him and, worse, he made you talk. He had a habit of dropping a word or sentence which somehow triggered you off and, before you knew where you were, you were telling the man things which you had never mentioned to a living soul.

Yes, Duncan was here on some secret mission of his own and, if they didn't watch out, he'd bring civilization tumbling in ruins by sheer personality.

Gaynor was affected the same way. Hengist smiled inwardly and corrected himself. Major Gaynor, demobilized, a high-ranking officer at the age of twenty-five and still paying for it.

Gaynor had an astute mind, a brilliant two-plus-two-equals-four mentality but he didn't know how to control it. In this day and age when the answer was four, and you knew it was four, you said five or three to be on the safe side. The ex-major would learn that kind of survival-addition too late.

Hengist sighed. He supposed he could have liked Gaynor too if he had ever permitted himself to like anyone, but love and friendship

were luxuries he couldn't afford--not if he wanted to stay alive.

He realized he had reached his destination, stepped on to the secondary and from there to the tenement block.

In the hutch-like, all-purpose room he pulled out the recessed table and the wall-chair and sat down. Might as well look at the official junk before he dialed a quick meal. Usually officialdom justified its existence by repetition and pompously phrased orders designed to impress the recipient officer with the sternness of his task.

Hengist sighed, slit the end of the long official envelope and tipped out the contents.

There were no official forms, only blank folded sheets of paper. What the hell?

He leaned forward, between two of the sheets was a small printed card.

He picked it up, held it between thumb and forefinger, and studied it, frowning:

The enclosed booklet is your assurance of well-being. It is provided to help you adjust to the new conditions you will be compelled to face. Its possession assures of an answer to any question which may arise in your mind. It is a guide to your future mental and physical behavior patterns.

GUARD AGAINST LOSS

The card slipped from Hengist's fingers and fluttered to the floor. He was conscious of a prickling dampness on his forehead and a remote constricting coldness in his stomach. His body felt detached as if he were controlling it at a distance and his vision seemed

blurred and out of focus.

With numb fingers he pushed the blank faceless papers shakily to one side. Beneath them was a small black book. Printed in red on the cover was the single word:

PROGRAMME.

Chapter Six

HENGIST STARED fixedly at the black book with the curious feeling he was unable to move his eyes from side to side.

Programed? Apart from shock he felt no different but he was suddenly aware that even he had no idea what programing was.

Fumblingly he turned back the cover.

Printed on the flysheet was a short note of identification and grim advice:

This book is the property of David Korvin Hengist (here—in after known as the patient), non-citizen, P-5-228G. The patient must understand that because of his inability to conform to present society he is mentally sick and has, therefore, been referred for treatment. This treatment is not a punishment for misdemeanor but a comprehensive therapy designed to restore him to normal society.

It is advised, therefore, that the patient familiarize himself with this book for his own immediate well-being and a swift return to normal life.

Period of treatment: Seven Years.

Hengist closed the book slowly and sat down. Gradually his mind was losing its numbness and beginning to function normally. In the waiting room it had been done, during the period when he thought he'd been dozing. A whiff of hypno-gas through the conditioner and he'd been trussed and ready.

A sudden anger rose within him. They'd known but they'd acted slyly,

creeping up behind him to steal his life and never told him why.

And Ralston had smiled. Smiled because he knew, because he was a sadist, because it pleased him to smile and because he was enjoying the joke.

With a sudden wrenching bitterness he knew why Lanie had cried. She, alone, had known and cared.

His mouth twisted slightly. How would he have treated her if she had been his? God, he wasn't worth her tears...

Why had they done this to him? What had he... ? Suddenly he knew--Kaft. Kaft had been made to look a fool and he, Hengist, had been an innocent witness of the director's discomfort.

Strangely, Hengist found that his resentment was directed more against Ralston than against Kaft. Ralston had smiled, Ralston had been pleased, yet Kaft owed him nothing, but Ralston...

He'd been with Ralston on a tour of inspection when a man had gone berserk in the street and hurled himself at Ralston with a length of pointed metal in his hand.

He, Hengist, had interposed his own body between the berserk and his superior officer and club-gunned the man just in time but he'd taken three inches of pointed metal in his own shoulder.

Ralston had smiled--smiled. God, he wished he'd helped the berserk man. He wished...

The pain seemed to start in the center of his brain and press downward against the back of his eyes. His vision blurred, panting he fell to his knees, both hands pressed to the sides of his head.

Slowly the pain turned to a dull burning and he pulled himself shakily to his feet. His whole body was soaked with perspiration and he was beset with an unnatural weakness.

He leaned against the wall, slowly beginning to understand. This was part of what they had done to him. This was--part of the programme.

Somewhere within the pages of the small black book this pain had meaning.

Numbly he reopened it. Pain, where was pain? On the first page he found a printed index.

Pain: Causes of... 62..."

He turned the pages almost in a frenzy. The patient experiences psychosomatic pain when his thoughts, actions or emotions are contrary to the therapeutic plan designed to restore him to health and his rightful place in society.

To determine the exact cause of pain, the patient must recall his thoughts or actions at time of onset. In all cases he will discover that he, himself, induced the attack by thought or action contrary to the plan for his recovery. It is advised, therefore, that the patient read the book thoroughly in order to determine his point of departure from the programme of rehabilitation.

Hengist sat down in the hard chair and turned over the pages. It took him nearly four minutes to find the answer. The patient is forbidden to harbor thoughts of revenge against society, Security Officers or registered officials. All Officers of the Administration work for the patient's well-being.

In order to aid his recovery the patient must learn to reject these sick thoughts and cultivate the correct ones of appreciation and gratitude.

Gratitude! Hengist felt his face flush with impotent fury. Of all the cynical hypocritical...

This time he whimpered when he fell to his knees. When he climbed unsteadily to his feet some three minutes later he picked up the book and forced himself to begin at the beginning.

The patient will vacate his living quarters within five hours and report to the nearest rehabilitation center. (A list of such centers may be found on page 210 of appendix). The patient will list his personal possessions and surrender them to the rehabilitation officer.

Hengist's mouth twisted bitterly. No one would come to remove him.

Procedure demanded that he throw himself out on his ear. Something would hit him right between the eyes if he didn't.

Give up all his possessions--did that include his gun? He'd be glad to give that up to the first creep he met. He'd have his finger ready on the trigger.

The agonizing cramp which suddenly twisted his arm almost out of shape brought a moan of pain from his lips.

The patient is forbidden to possess weapons.

Shaking with the aftermath of pain, he dialed for a stiff drink. How much of this sort of thing was a man supposed to take?

With some difficulty he brought the glass to his lips and tipped the liquor down his throat.

The pain which hit his stomach almost folded him in half. Sweat trickled down his face as he vomited the liquor back.

The patient is forbidden the use of drugs, stimulants or alcohol.

Holding himself upright by the table, he fumbled a cigarette from his breast pocket. He dropped it twice before he was able to flick off the plastic tip. God, much more of this and...

He coughed at the first puff. He coughed until the tears were running from his eyes and the air wheezed painfully in his lungs.

The patient may not smoke.

Wearily he sat down. The pattern was clear now--compulsive conditioning. Whatever he did or, for that matter, considered doing was contrary to the 'programme.' It triggered off a pain reaction. Under hypnosis his future conduct had been shaped for him within a comprehensive reflex action. If he departed from the programme in thought or deed, pain would kick him back again.

In six months he would be walking and thinking as delicately as a cat on a high wire, afraid to digress from his impressed conduct pattern by a fraction of an inch.

Within a year he would believe it was for his own good.

In two years he would be begging permission to thank both Kaft and Ralston for their kindness in referring him for treatment.

At the end of his treatment it wouldn't matter. He'd be fixed in a thought and behavior pattern which nothing could break until the end of his life.

"I suppose I asked for it," he thought, bitterly. "They offered me a job and because it seemed legit and secure I took it. When I began to understand the kind of organization I was in..."

Too late then. Don the cloak of the assassin or jump off a cliff. Naturally you choose the cloak, you salved your conscience with the thought that, after all, you were not actually part of the Secret Police. You were a guard.

You protected people.

Looking back, you found you'd done a double-think when you asked yourself if the vermin you stood in front of were worth protecting. You closed your eyes to facts and adopted the age old philosophy of "I'm all right, Jack."

This was the reckoning. This was the payment. There were no watch towers, no brutal guards but they'd taken the hopelessness, the pain, the double barriers of barbed and electrified wire and put them in his mind.

He straightened. They thought. Not to him, definitely not to him. He still had the gun, he'd lived by it now, damn them, he'd get the last laugh by dying by it.

The convulsion arched him backwards, twisted his limbs and tossed him helpless and whimpering into the corner of the room. Finger nails scrabbled at the floor, froth trickled from the corners of his mouth...

Attempts at self-destruction are primary symptoms of the patient's mental state and must be resisted with every effort of the will.

There was a small line of furtive and frightened looking men outside the rehabilitation center.

Hengist was the last, the sun was warm on his back but he was shivering uncontrollably. His body ached as if it had been beaten and

he had the curious feeling that his stomach was swinging jerkily inside him from a short length of elastic.

Slowly the line shuffled forwards. "Already," he thought, bitterly, "we bear the stamp of sneak-thieves. We're bowed like beggars, whining, obscene, ready to ingratiate ourselves with the first person we meet who has authority. We're ready to plead, beg, go on our knees, anything to be left in peace."

The first person he met with authority sat behind an incongruously gay desk in a bleak bare room. She had her hair bound loosely back and brought round to run in bright waves over her left shoulder. The style made her look gentle, girlish and almost virginal.

With a sick feeling inside he-realized that he knew her. Her name was Vanda Mayne and he had met her more than once at security conferences.

"Well, well," she said, softly. "How mighty are the fallen."

She crossed her legs carefully and with deliberation. "You like my legs?"

A lot of men think they're nice." She wore a black pleated skirt which reached only half way down her thighs and a white, tightly fitting blouse which was almost, but not quite transparent. She placed a cigarette between her lips and looked at him with large blue eyes.

"She's beautiful," he thought, dully. "Beautiful, calculating and cold and she's going to give me hell."

"You haven't answered my question," she said, softly. "Do you like my legs?"

He swallowed. "Yes--er--yes, they're very nice--very beautiful,

Officer."

"Ah, I like the Officer, you're learning already, I see. You pay a pretty fair compliment too, considering your position but then, you always did like the women, didn't you?" She raised her hand and began to stroke her hair slowly. "You see this white button on my shoulder, lover boy? In case you don't know, it's a release stud. All I have to do is to press and this blouse will drop to my waist. You'd like that, wouldn't you? The stud at my waist does the same thing for my skirt, do you find that intriguing?" She smiled, almost sympathetically. "Not now, eh? Maybe in a month or, better still, two months when you're hungry. When you want a woman so much you'll go hot every time you see a curved line on a piece of paper."

You won't have women here, you know, not for years and, only then if Elgin feels kindly disposed and he never does. Nonetheless I'll let you look.

You'll hate and hate because you'll see me naked and can't have me."

He closed his eyes, fought himself, nails biting into the palms of his hands. Pain was already twisting the inside of his stomach, bending him over and shortening his breath.

The patient is forbidden to harbor thoughts of revenge or hatred against society, Security Officers or registered officials.

"Stand upright and open your eyes, darling."

He shivered inwardly and forced himself to comply.

"Don't tell me you don't like women, lover boy, or have you forgotten so soon. We haven't forgotten, we know. The joy houses, the parties, the hired women." She exhaled smoke slowly into his face. "Oh yes,

dear, we know, we know everything. How you got drunk and talked to them about your mother. God, we even know what your mother looked like. Remember Eltha? Oh, but you must remember Eltha".

"You cried in her arms and said you were sick of killing and, worse, you were cold sober."

She shook her head slowly. "Then, of course, there was Lanie. You were afraid of her, afraid of whom she might belong to, so you just hung around making frog's eyes and slick wisecracks." She laughed softly. "The real joke is she belonged to no one and, better still, she was in love with you. You could have had her for the asking. If it's any consolation she'll be joining the happy breed of programmed defectives within a few days. If the race is to survive, we must remove the weak links and recast them. Lover boy, stand upright when I'm speaking to you."

She paused and flicked ash delicately into the disposal slot. "You know, dear, sometimes I think there's something a little obscene about people like you. Women like you, even those whose bodies you hired for sexual relief. They said you were considerate. They said you were gentle. They said you treated them like human beings." She laughed softly. "Imagine that."

She moved, stretching herself sensually and with deliberate provocation. "You like, Romeo?" She straightened and tossed the half-smoked cigarette on the floor. "Pick it up."

He stared at her.

"You heard me, moron. Pick it up."

He picked it up.

"Now dispose of it. No, not in my disposal slot, you fool, your own."

"What? Please?" He looked wildly about him.

"So I was right, you are a moron. Look, do I have to draw a diagram, stupid? You've a mouth haven't you? You have also a tongue. Get rid of the cigarette and clean the ash from the floor."

He felt veins stand out on his forehead, his hands clenched. He tried to shout, "You stinking bitch," but toppled side-- ways, choking before the words would come.

She watched him indifferently as he writhed on the floor, then leaned forward and touched a sense-plate with the tip of her finger.

A door slid open and two cowed-looking men ran in.

"Take him away," she said.

The agony seemed to seep out of his pores slowly, receding in slow tides of darkness and leaving him weak and trembling.

Someone was holding water to his mouth. He swallowed, choked and swallowed again.

He opened his eyes. A thin-faced man with lank brown hair was kneeling beside him and dabbing at his forehead with a fragment of damp plastic sponge.

"My poor sick friend," said the man. He had the artificially unctuous voice of a man who had made soothing platitudes habitual.

Hengist stared at him uncomprehendingly.

"I am your guide," said the man. "My name is Desmond. I have been

appointed by the medical staff to help new patients. You're sick, you know, you will realize this as time goes by." He blinked watery brown eyes at Hengist almost in appeal. "Soon you will be made whole again."

Hengist winced but he said, harshly. "Who the hell do you think you're fooling?"

"Ah, a year ago, my reactions were the same. You think you are the victim of a conspiracy but that is a delusion, my friend, and part of your sickness."

The man took his arm. "You must get up, now. Soon Director Elgin will be here."

Hengist saw that he was in a small, brightly lighted room with a raised platform at one end. Tightly packed, and in even ranks, twenty or thirty blank looking males stared expectantly at the platform.

A sickness seemed to rise inside him. He was one of these, in a year he was going to be slimy, unctuous and vaguely obscene like Desmond. He was going to--Oh, God, no, got to get out, got to get away, try. Let them shoot...

He struggled to his knees then keeled over sideways, moaning.

"You must get up. You must get up." Desmond was tugging at his arm.

He couldn't, he knew he couldn't. Even if the cramp stopped twisting his legs, he would be too weak and beaten. Pain wracked his body but, strangely, his vision was clear.

A uniformed man walked onto the platform, a man with a small pot belly which bulged out the front of his tunic and made him look as if

he were leaning slightly backwards.

The man walked to the center of the platform, spread his legs, locked his hands behind his back and glowered at them. The action made him seem to lean backwards even more.

"Desmond."

"Sir?"

"What is that man doing on the floor?" Director Elgin had the petulant, pushed-in face of an ill-tempered toy dog.

Desmond stepped forward, fawning. "Please, sir, our poor sick friend is a new patient. He has just suffered a very bad attack."

Elgin made a snorting noise through his nose. "Desmond."

"Sir?"

"Step forward and kick our poor sick friend in the teeth."

Chapter Seven

THE NEW BODYGUARD was a watery-eyed youth with a slack immature mouth and all the observable symptoms of a psychopath. His fingers twitched, he shifted his weight restlessly from one foot to the other and he was obsessed with the thought of killing.

"Don't needle this one." Duncan's voice was casual but Gaynor got the warning.

He submitted, without comment to a thorough check and provocative and unnecessary rough handling.

"You pass." The voice was thin and nasal. "My name's Varren, you address me as Mister Varren--see?"

"I understand, Mr. Varren." Gaynor kept his voice expressionless.

"I hope you do or you'll be sorry, very sorry indeed." He took out his gun and began to fondle it. "This one can kick in your teeth or punch a hole in your guts. Don't forget, eh?"

"I won't, Mr. Varren." Gaynor walked to the nearest chair and dropped into it.

"Know what happened to Hengist?" Gaynor said in a low voice.

"I can guess. He saw too much, partly my fault I'm afraid," said Duncan.

"I feel I did him an injustice somehow. He was an ex-veteran and, in his own way, just as much a prisoner as you and I."

"I know. Hengist forgot sometimes and dropped his mask."

"He's been programed." Gaynor fumbled for a cigarette, his hand unsteady. "Makes me feel..."

"You got a cold, perhaps?" Varren leaned over the back of his chair.

"When you speak, speak up. You understand me?"

It was Duncan who answered. "Don't push your luck, Varren. I have the privileges of a first class citizen and Mr. Gaynor is my guest. Anything I say and he reports is not only prearranged but censored afterwards."

Varren's mouth twisted. "Don't say that to me, Mr. Duncan. You're under house arrest and--"

He stopped abruptly. Duncan had risen from his chair. He did nothing, his expression had not changed and, when he spoke, his voice was still calm.

"Go and sit down, Varren, go and sit down before you're hurt."

Varren paled, his mouth opened and shut, muscles twitched in his cheeks. "All right, Mr. Duncan, all right."

"Good. I am glad we now understand one another. Mr. Gaynor and I are now going to look at the laboratory with, or without, your permission."

Once inside, Gaynor said, "What the hell did you do to him?"

"Nothing but play on his psychology by suggesting he might get hurt. At the back of his mind, you see, he's convinced I'm a sort of super monster.

Consequently he is ready to see danger where none exists."

"I thought he was dangerous."

"He is, very dangerous, more so since he is overcompensating for his terror." Duncan sighed. "Unfortunately there is nothing one can do for him, there are only two forces he understands--fear and pain."

He indicated one of the hard laboratory chairs. "Do sit down. I asked you in because you have a fly on your sleeve." He caught it deftly. "I'm interested in insects."

"I should have thought," said Gaynor, carefully, "that you had enough on your mind without worrying about insects." He sighed. "There was a time when nothing could get through the insect barriers but maintenance is third rate now; what was it--a common house fly?"

"That depends on the word 'common' doesn't it?" He inserted it skillfully into a viewer and pressed a switch. "This takes a little time to warm up but--" He made a number of adjustments and squinted through the eye-pieces. "Ah, as I suspected. Look."

Gaynor leaned forward, the view--probably a product of Duncan's superior technology--was like a pair of binoculars sunk into a square black box. Through the eye-pieces a lighted screen revealed both external and internal structure of the tiny insect--only it wasn't an insect.

Gaynor felt a curious unbelieving numbness. Clearly visible in the screen was the tiny solar motor and an incredibly complicated drive mechanism for the wings. Behind the compound faceted eyes were the complete circuits for a comprehensive tele-recording unit.

Gaynor found himself sweating. No one, to his knowledge, could construct micro-devices of such precision, on this planet.

"Where the hell did it come from?"

"That I shall have to find out. It will need a little care, there's a minute container beside the motor with a detectable reaction, possible hydro-nuclear or solar energy matter." Duncan shook his head thoughtfully. "It's not big enough to be lethal but one's fingers are also valuable."

"I still don't know how you propose to find out where it came from."

Gaynor was trying to sound casual.

"Well, obviously, it isn't radio-controlled or it would be detectable. It is therefore comprehensively programmed so all I need are the programme tapes. I can then interpret the electronic symbols and trace backwards."

"That sounds a full time job."

"It will take some little time. The only way to deal with a micro device effectively is to construct and programme another micro device to take it to pieces."

"How long will that take?"

"With what I have to work with here, about three days."

"Do you think it's--" Gaynor stopped, suddenly remembering his position.

Duncan sensed the hesitation and smiled understandingly. "Don't worry, no one can listen. I took precautions against that some days ago, much to security's annoyance. And, no, to answer your unspoken question, I don't think it's theirs."

"Then where?"

"That we must find out. The people who programmed this micro-robot know enough about this city to use you as transport."

"You mean I'm being watched?"

"Only as a means of reaching me."

"Things are getting complicated." Gaynor leaned back against the work bench and knocked something with his arm.

"Hell." He made frantic catching motions...

There was a crash and tinkling sounds.

"I'm dreadfully sorry." Gaynor stared uncomfortably at the bright shards on the floor.

"Forget it." Duncan smiled. "Pure accident and it was only a retort."

Gaynor was still frowning at the floor. "Isn't that glass? I can't think of another substance which would break so easily."

"As a matter of fact, yes. It was quite useless."

"Then why have it?"

"No good reason but it probably kept a lot of people busy finding it. It was included in my list of essentials, you see, and I've no doubt the authorities had to comb the existing museums to find it."

Gaynor frowned at him. "I suppose there's a point somewhere. It's just that I don't see it."

Duncan smiled. "It's quite simple. When, under pressure, I agreed to co-operate. I asked for equipment. They were already dubious and a lot of easily procured articles would have increased their suspicions even further. They would have regarded my agreement as a hoax, as an empty promise which I had no intention of fulfilling. Unlikely and unusual items, however, suggested serious intent." Duncan laughed softly, "Bureaucratic institutions are always impressed with complication."

Gaynor fought down an urge to burst out laughing. The man was so damn casual. "You must have spent a long time studying us."

"Long enough. Once you get the hang of race psychology, emotional as well as intellectual tendencies are predictable." He bent down. "Better remove this glass. The robotic cleaners ' will get rid of the small stuff, the larger pieces had better go into disposal. If you would be good enough to hand me that culture tray--also impressive--it will serve as a dust-pan.

Thank you."

Gaynor watched him tip the pieces into the disposal unit and stand upright.

"Will they--" Gaynor stopped suddenly. "I say, you've cut your hand."

Duncan glanced at the deep ragged gash running across the center of his palm. "So I have. Careless of me, I had forgotten that aspect of broken glass."

"It's a nasty one, you'd better get it attended to."

"It's nothing." Duncan held the edges of the wound together. "It will be healed within an hour."

"An hour!" Now, look--" Gaynor stopped. "Ah, I suppose that's some mental asset you have, control over the bodily functions."

Duncan laughed. "Mr. Gaynor, you're overawed by my background. The truth is, I'm just normally healthy."

"Healthy!" Gaynor looked angry and puzzled. "I should call that an exaggeration. I was pronounced A-one at my last medic and a wound like that would take about twelve days to clear up."

"You judge by the standards to which you are accustomed and since, by these standards, twelve days is average, you draw a line and say: "There is the norm, I am healthy."

"You speak as if I were a physical wreck. Is something wrong with my body?"

Duncan looked at him thoughtfully. "By comparison, yes. Your body is a beleaguered citadel, rejected by its allies and deserted by its friends.

Periodically it divides against itself and wastes enormous energy not only putting things to rights but attacking those who exist to befriend it."

Gaynor stared at him. "Is this on the level?"

"It is, you'll learn about it one day. In the meantime, let us make a few comparisons. You have in your left hand pocket an unopened packet of cigarettes, the top of which you have absent-mindedly been trying to open with your thumb and forefinger--correct?"

"Correct." Gaynor sounded slightly out of breath. "What is 'this--some sort of parapsychic faculty?"

"If you call normal hearing a parapsychic faculty, yes."

"Normal hearing?" Gaynor realized he was being repetitive and probably sounding obtuse.

"Yes, normal hearing." Duncan was smiling gently. "As I told you, this is a comparison. I could show similar results with sight but it's less demonstrable in a confined space."

"You heard me." Gaynor shook his head slowly. "How did you know what it was?"

"With acute hearing, interpretation follows naturally."

Gaynor grinned ruefully. "It has certain obvious advantages."

"Very obvious. Our psychopathic friend has twice crossed the room and stood listening by the door. He is now about two feet from the door, leaning against the wall and checking one of his weapons."

Gaynor said: "My God!" Then, wearily, "It's a ripe world, isn't it?"

Somehow I feel that human nature should have changed, even if that change was almost as slow as evolution but, no, in the last few decades it's gotten worse."

"No one has seen human nature, only its distortion."

Gaynor said, "Pardon?"

Duncan repeated the remark. "You look back in history and there has always been oppression, war, rapine, cruelty, destruction. These excesses, you conclude, reflect the nature of man, but do they? Are violence, cruelty, disloyalty, vice, part of a natural order when they live side by side with self-sacrifice, friendship, love and other virtues?"

When all these factors exist in the single individual surely something is wrong? What order do you find in a man who loves his wife and children but callously ill-treats his neighbors because of his political opinions? Human nature? I think not, again you have drawn a line and said this is the norm."

Gaynor frowned. "I'm beginning to see what you're getting at. Have you come to impose a new order?"

"Did I suggest that? I could have been suggesting a theory or even propounding a philosophy."

"Cagey, aren't you?"

"Call it natural caution."

"Bluntly, you don't trust me?"

Duncan smiled. "Wrong end of the stick. You have to decide for yourself whether you trust me."

Gaynor frowned, thinking about it. "I suppose you're right, yes, damn it, you are right." He flicked the lip from a cigarette and inhaled deep.,- "This I shall have to think about."

"Before you think, look." Duncan held out his hand.

Gaynor stared. The jagged gash was not only completely closed but some of the scab seemed loose and ready to flake away.

The reporter puffed at his cigarette, frowning. "I suppose that sort of thing is natural for you. I suppose, if the "truth" were known, you regard us as so many apes. Obviously you're an intellectual giant but gentleman enough to hide it."

Duncan laughed. "Thank you for the implied compliment but you're quite wrong. Let us say I have the advantages of a superior education which has provided me with a new viewpoint. I have been trained to observe not the obvious but the potential and the potential is enormous."

"I don't follow you."

"Let me put it this way. Are the feeble gestures of one sick bedridden man any indication of the potential of a healthy one?"

Gaynor ground out his half-smoked cigarette and flicked the tip off another almost in one movement. "I've often heard of food for thought but, hell, this is a surfeit. I'll lie awake for nights chewing this lot over." He exhaled smoke. "Look, I'm not supposed to ask these questions so you don't have to answer but, off the record, why did you come? When application was made you could have refused."

Duncan nodded. "True, but there are several answers to your questions.

First the Mattrain, although among friends I was still an alien. Second, in its present stage of development, there are limits to the capacity of the human mind to absorb knowledge. At the age of thirty, beside the average Mattrain, I was little more than a very bright infant. In short., I was the ape, house-trained and extraordinarily intelligent. By the standards of my own race but, beside my foster-parents--" Duncan did not finish the sentence.

"Surely you knew what it's like here? You knew you might get knocked off as soon as you arrived?"

"Yes, I knew. I also knew that here a certain task had to be undertaken.

The Mattrain were prepared to do it but I was the obvious choice so I volunteered."

"What sort of job?" Gaynor tried hard to keep the suspicion out of his voice.

"Sorry, maybe I'll give you a clue later."

Gaynor frowned but he said, evenly, "Any other reasons?"

"Well," Duncan smiled, "I hoped I might find myself a wife sooner or later."

"A wife!" Gaynor did not realize he sounded rude until it was too late.

"Good God!"

"Is it so strange?" Duncan's voice was almost wistful. "I was not aware that certain intellectual advantages produced sexual indifference."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean it that way. It was just surprise."

"I suppose I'm still looking at you as a sort of sexless computer." Gaynor grinned apologetically. "Hardly tactful or flattering. May I ask another question?"

"Go ahead?"

"Well there's a rumor that the Mattrain worlds have something which protects them, a super weapon or perhaps some natural phenomena. Is it true?"

Duncan shook his head slowly. "At the present time I cannot answer that question in full, nonetheless I'll give you a lead. You can fight a

people, you can fight a technology but you cannot conquer a people and a planet. The Mattrain worlds could be destroyed but never conquered."

Gaynor shook his head slowly. "I don't understand you, of course, but you always appear frank so I'll put my cards on the table. As a man I like you. You're direct, friendly and, even if you despise me intellectually it doesn't show and, for that, I'm grateful. On the other hand, when I give it thought, the whole set-up seems slightly improbable. You walk into a dangerous situation and allow yourself to be coerced into giving away technical information which, you must know, will be used to the detriment of the race. When questioned you're ready with a set of slick answers which, although remarkable enough in themselves, add up to only a minute total of your obvious potential. None of it appears to justify your threat to the race or, come to that, the obvious risk to yourself."

"So?"

"So I reason it like this." Gaynor paused and swallowed, suddenly uncomfortable but determined to say his piece. "You're here on a mission but whether it's good or bad I still have to reason out for myself. Whether you're working for the Mattrain or acting on your own initiative I don't know but I'd like to find out what that mission is."

Duncan nodded, thoughtfully. "I admire your honesty and congratulate you on your reasoning. Yes, stretching a point, I suppose I am here on a mission."

"But you're not going to tell me what it is?"

"Not entirely but, as I said earlier, I'll give you a clue." He paused. "The race has a long and bloody, history. It has fought against itself and against the Vrenka--"

"So?"

Duncan shook his head a little sadly. "I'm sorry to tell you this, Gaynor, but there could be a final enemy..."

Chapter Eight

KAFT LEANED FORWARD in his chair, his face expressionless. "Well, what is it?"

"Something you damn well ought to see." Dowd looked both belligerent and nervous. "It's very seldom I support Rickman but in this case--" He tossed something on Kaft's desk and dropped into the nearest chair.

"You'd better read that."

Kaft's mouth thinned. He watched Rickman occupy another chair and search his pockets nervously for his cigar case. Dowd had, Kaft decided, brought Rickman along for moral support and this was some sort of showdown.

"Let us not become hysterical." Kaft's voice was soothing. "And, Dowd, please, you know I detest riddles. Before I look at the paper you have thrown on my desk, let us hear first why you came and, second, the origin of that piece of paper."

Dowd calmed himself. He was a naturally aggressive and overbearing man but Kaft had the knack of making him feel adolescent and unruly.

Rickman, watching, felt the familiar coldness in his belly. Kaft frightened him. Kaft with his unnatural calm and unwieldy over-wordy sentences. God, looking at him, made you shiver. He was leaning forward now, scraggy necked, bald head catching the light and looking rather like a snake. Yes that was it, a snake, an ancient cobra rising up from behind the desk, poised and ready to strike. "Hold," he told himself, frantically.

"Hold it. Pay attention. Listen," but the flutterings in his stomach went on.

"Well, as you know," Dowd was saying, "I've a lot of ships out at the moment primarily for base reconstruction. The Vrenka left very little to work on. One of these ships, checking her sub-radio equipment, picked up a message on the absolute fringe of known bands and recorded it." He pointed. "The paper on your desk is that message. I suggest you read it."

Kaft picked up the paper between thumb and forefinger. "These symbols?"

"The symbols are the original message. You will find the translation on the opposite page."

Kaft turned it over slowly and began to read. There was no visible change of expression on his face but his thin brows drew together slightly.

Sir,

Conditions here are several times worse than we imagined with the entire structure in wild and hopeless disorder. A few more su* [Periods of 53 Terran days -translator] and it would have been too late. I am glad to report that phase one of Operation Ratio has already begun and phase two should be complete in one local cycle.

I must report with regret, however, that certain sections, (an approximate 25%) are so grossly distorted that reshaping is out of the question. Under these circumstances violence cannot be avoided and, inevitably, the race will have to do its own pruning.

Kaft laid the message down. "There was no signature?"

"Nothing, not even a call sign."

"And the symbols?"

"They are Mattrain representation symbols. The translation has been double checked by a team of experts."

"This message was destined for Mattrain?"

"Undoubtedly, the co-ordinates were checked by the computers." Dowd leaned forward. "The important point, however, is that the message came from Earth. Do you have to guess who sent it?"

Kaft nodded slowly. "This is no time for games and, I agree, the source is obvious."

"We should have killed him," said Rickman. "We should have killed him as soon as he got here."

Dowd scowled at him. "All right, we gambled and lost." He looked directly at Kaft. "What are we going to do and how soon? Rickman's warnings do seem close now. The message suggests some sort of take-over bid with Duncan sending a progress report."

"A do-gooder," said Rickman. He chewed angrily at his cigar. "This sounds like a brilliant little scheme to coerce us into a Mattrain-inspired culture. A kind of alien Sunday school to make all and everyone happy."

Only I don't like the pruning part."

"Yes." Dowd looked at him thoughtfully and very nearly with respect.

"You know something, Kaft, he could be right. Want to lay bets as to who gets pruned first?"

Kaft nodded. "I am inclined to agree with both of you but let us use our heads. It would be unwise to be panicked into some sort of action which might prove disastrous. For instance, have we any guarantee that Duncan's death will stop the operation?" He paused, suddenly grim. "The wrong course of action might precipitate something worse, we must stop and think this out."

"Yes. Yes." Dowd was nodding slowly. Despite his hatred of Kaft he was intelligent enough to respect both his judgment and his considered caution. "Had you something in mind?"

"It would be unwise to kill him before we know what he's doing. If we could see some of his equipment we might be able to get some idea of his plans and perhaps thwart them. We might also be able to follow through on some of his techniques and turn them against him. If not, of course, we must kill and ask questions afterwards which might prove unrewarding."

"I see your point." Dowd pulled at his ear, frowning. "We got him into that laboratory, surely it would be easy enough to get him out."

"And have him destroy or remove his equipment first? That would be pointless. No, we'll have to move him by subtlety, get him out on some plausible pretext and have experts check, copy and photograph every device in the place. After all, even a superman cannot send a sub-space radio call without equipment."

Rickman laughed harshly. "I suppose I'm always out of line but I still say kill him. In the first place I don't think any pretext will deceive him and, in the second, I think you're deluding yourselves. For example, and to quote from the text, you can build a non-directional sub-space radio transmitter with--again I quote--one solar cell, two Sharon compensator grids, one Larange tube and four short lengths of high

resistance wire. I've no doubt our alien friend can make one with a good deal less."

Dowd said, "You make a good point but I think Kaft's is sounder. We could lose a lot of golden eggs killing this goose."

"Yes and this goose could cook ours while we rob the nest."

"There are limits to expedience," said Kaft. "So far he has fulfilled his promises." He turned to Dowd. "I understand the new plastic is revolutionary."

"As a matter of fact we're still making tests. This stuff could take a solar bomb attack."

"All right." Rickman sounded beaten and resigned. "Carry on until it's too late."

"Why don't you shut up?" shouted Dowd. "We'll kill him soon enough, we just want a look at his equipment first."

"Seems simple enough to me, give him a holiday, show him the world and, when he comes back--bang."

Kaft leaned back in his chair. "Well! Rickman, sometimes your direct simplicity teeters on the edge of genius--why not? Why not let him see the world, a tour of inspection. We promised to relax restrictions. Such a concession not only suits us admirably but, if handled skillfully, allays suspicion. Yes, the ideal solution, ideal."

The caller interrupted him and he laid his finger on the sense plate.

"Yes? Yes, send him up." He looked at them. "Statten, unlike him to be unpunctual." Fifteen seconds later General Statten almost ran into the room. He looked greasy, alarmed and slightly furtive.

"Thank God you're all here." He dropped into a vacant chair and fumbled with a brief case. "This, to my mind, is bad, damn bad."

"We were discussing Duncan," said Kaft, mildly. "To hell with Duncan."

He got the case open at last and fumbled inside it. "Here we are. Take a look at that." He rose and laid a photograph on the Supreme Director's desk. Kaft frowned at it. "Where did this come from?"

"One of our four survey ships."

"Where was it?"

"Maximum limit, thank God. As soon as it spotted this thing, the crew did the sensible thing and took a jump into hyper-drive."

"Let's see that." Rickman snatched the photograph before anyone could say no.

It was not a good photograph, it was a long distance magnified shot taken at the absolute limit of the radar-camera's range. The developed print was wavy and blurred at the edges but there was no mistaking the subject. It showed a long, blunt-nosed, curiously waisted object which was all too obviously a spaceship. The vessel conformed to no design known to man. It was not Vrenka, not Mattrain.

"Oh, God," thought Rickman. "Another batch of blasted aliens, pray God they haven't found us yet."

The private luxury flyer rose slowly above the city with its escort of eight security vessels.

Duncan leaned back against the comfortable upholstery and exhaled smoke. "I hope they find what they want."

Gaynor stared at him blankly. "You think there's something at the back of this trip?"

"Administrations such as this one are not given to magnanimous gestures. Friend Kaft couldn't keep the enthusiasm out of his voice. The more casual he became about concessions for my services, the more he betrayed his eagerness to get me out of the laboratory." Duncan smiled faintly. "Acute hearing makes one conscious of intonation, consequently one learns quickly to interpret."

"In short, he's up to something?"

Duncan laughed softly. "Of course, nonetheless I'm glad of this trip. It makes a welcome break. In the first place, I have no idea where I am. I arrived in a closed ship, whisked to the city and kept there. I only assume we're in a tropical or semi-tropical zone but beyond that I'm lost."

"We're in South America." Gaynor was marveling at the other's outward calm. The man must be extraordinarily sure of himself. Aloud, he said, "A thousand years ago this was unexplored jungle then some expedition or other discovered uranium deposits. Needless to say, a city grew up here almost overnight. Later, when man discovered solar energy, and nuclear devices became as obsolete as the combustion engine, the city lost purpose and almost faced death. Fortunately, however, World Government decided it was an ideal center for administration purposes and moved in lock, stock and barrel." He paused. "By the way, we're not being spied, are we?"

"If we are, some unfortunate technician fell flat on his face about ten

minutes ago."

Gaynor scowled at him. "Despite a liking for you which my intelligence tells me I should distrust, there are times when I could cheerfully strangle you. You're so damned casual."

Duncan smiled, gently. "Sorry, I keep forgetting you're not wholly in the picture. I suppose, subconsciously, I am already regarding you as an ally."

Gaynor frowned again. "I've been thinking about that. You were right. I was not sure if you could be trusted. Look, I'll lay my cards on the table. I still don't trust you wholly, but in my estimation, you're infinitely preferable to those lice down there. I'm with you, with one reservation. If it's worse in the frying pan than it was in the fire I shall do my level best to rub you out. Is that quite clear?"

"Perfectly clear." Duncan held out his hand. "And I trust you will never be forced to kill although, I regret, there must be violence. Some people may dislike certain changes."

"Then you are here to take over and impose a new order."

Duncan smiled and shook his head. "Wrong on all counts. I have no intention of assuming the cloak of leadership or, for that matter, permitting any other life form to do it. Yes, there will be a new order, true order, but I shall not impose it. True order like true freedom resides in the individual and cannot be imposed from without."

Gaynor looked perplexed. "I follow the philosophy but the rest escapes me. I can see clearly that you cannot impose an ideal on man by holding a gun at his head. He may act and speak as you wish but his mind is in revolt, even our mutual friends down there get that point."

Duncan sighed. "This is a little difficult as it involves a superior technology."

"Ah, you have a gimmick, a device."

"You can put it that way if you wish although it's far from accurate. In truth I need an interpreter to make it understandable."

"Have you one in mind?"

"Well, yes, but unfortunately something happened to her. Her name was Martha Deering, a solar physicist. Ever heard of her?"

Gaynor leaned forward. "Of course, security had the hell of a job trying to seal off stories about her. Apparently she was programme resistant."

"What happened then?"

"God knows, there were millions of guesses. The most persistent and, incidentally, the most unlikely is that they started working on her from another angle but she escaped in a private flyer. As there was nowhere she could go, the real truth is, probably, that they killed her." He glanced quickly out of the window. "Hello, we're going up, ten to one you're first point of inspection is the D.A."

"Is there nothing else to see?"

"Candidly, not much and, in any case, your visit has propaganda value.

You gloat or seem shocked, according to the news service."

"Apart from propaganda, has the administration nothing to show, no monument to its own conceit, nothing?"

"Nothing. North America is as drab as the South, further, it is a trouble spot. Resistance is, of course, individual but it never stops."

"Africa?"

"A desert. The old story of over-cultivation and subsequent soil erosion.

There has been a lot of talk about, reclamation but nothing has ever been done. A few cities still cling to the coastline but behind them is a never-ending Sahara."

Duncan frowned. "A sick race on a sick planet."

Gaynor looked at him thoughtfully. "You're an adept at standing on the brink of something, aren't you? I wish I knew just where you're leading?"

"As I've told you before, I can't go into details but there is an enemy and that enemy must be rendered harmless. As it stands now, the repercussions may be violent and disturbing. So, for your peace of mind and your subsequent support, it would be better if you followed through step by step."

Gaynor said, "I get the drift but--" He changed the subject abruptly.

"Why did you put that idea of visiting the prisoners in my mind?"

"With new understanding, there is a possibility of cooperation. I wanted the seeds sown at an early date."

Gaynor sighed, suddenly resolved to curb his curiosity. "Let's hope that it happens soon." He became suddenly conscious that the center of gravity had shifted and that the vessels were arrowing

upwards away from the Earth. "Hello, we're going to leap-frog, jump to the D.A."

"What are your reactions?"

"Not cheerful. I have never been there but I've seen pictures. Thousands of miles of graveyard is not an inspiring subject for study and there is an unpleasant story about it too."

"Hengist told me they got through with what he called spinners."

"Spinners and other things, mostly heat-generating weapons. The worst part is, although it is not generally known, that the Vrenka had never tried for the home planet until one of the suicide vessels got through and clobbered theirs. As you will see, there were no half-measures. I don't know what the solar bombs did to Vrenka but they certainly hit back fast and hard."

"In a way you respect the Vrenka, don't you?"

"They fought to their own rules but they kept to them. We, on the other hand, had only the individual consciences of ship commanders to make the rules. The majority were decent enough men but the principles they might have kept were often vetoed by the lice back home."

Duncan looked at him thoughtfully. "Gaynor, what you're trying to tell me is that you're ashamed of your own race. You have a guilt complex about it and, worse, you're humiliated that a creature which, in your eyes stepped out of a nightmare, has a superior code of conduct."

Gaynor shifted his position uncomfortably. "I can't deny it but it makes me damned uncomfortable to hear it. One cause, I suppose, is immaturity."

We judge a creature's morals and intelligence by its appearance. If it's not humanoid, it automatically becomes a monster."

"Now you find the truth difficult to live with?"

"Very difficult and looking back, at history--" Gaynor stopped uncomfortably.

Duncan placed an ignited cigarette between his lips. "Tell me, Gaynor, by what standard do you judge the mentally sick?"

"Standard? What sort of--"

Duncan cut him short. "Remember what I said about a sick race? This heritage of violence could be part of that sickness."

"Are you suggesting we're all nut cases?"

"Not quite, but you could be far from normal. Tell me, as an ex-commando, can you compare your mental state now with your mental state in action?"

"Hell, there's a world of difference."

"Precisely. A reasoning intelligence is hardly at its best when fighting for its life."

Chapter Nine

"WE'RE GOING DOWN." Gaynor craned forward staring at the heavy cloud bank which seemed to be rushing to meet them. "A hundred to one it's the D.A. and, as I said earlier, the story about it is even grimmer than the view. Of course, I'm not supposed to know but you can't really hush up a story like that--" He broke off. "Ah, mountains, the Alps, I think."

He leaned forward and touched a switch. An illuminated guide map appeared in the facing wall of the flyer with a white dot marking their exact position.

"Not a bad guess. It was the Alps but I'm way out on our estimated course."

They were now descending slowly. Mist swirled round the curved viewing ports, clung there briefly and was gone.

Duncan looked down and suppressed a gasp. It was far worse than Gaynor had suggested.

Below the torn and blackened land was pitted, cratered and twined with unnatural canals. They were still too high for details but here and there were piles of jagged ruins which might once have been cities. White strips, terminating abruptly on the lips of craters, marked the beginning and ending, of what might once have been major highways.

On the map the white spot was passing slowly over printed words:

SECTOR DEUTSCH Precinct Berl

The vessels were still descending slowly and the two men began to distinguish details.

Craters, which in the course of years had filled with water, had become lakes and the whole area was twisted and twined with unnatural canals.

Cities appeared to have fallen in on themselves and flown together liquidly like wax models exposed to a hot sun.

Duncan saw one immense building, bent or melted into a huge arch, its upper story resting in the glazed ruins on the opposite side of what had once been a main street. It had been golden once but it was now a muddy discolored brown. It looked like a huge and dirty half melted candle into which someone had cut the shape of windows.

On the map the white spot was moving slowly over the words:

SECTOR FRANK

Precinct Par

As they approached the coastline they were low enough to see the individual waves. A high wind was whipping the waters of a narrow channel into a turmoil of grey-green waves and flying spume.

Once four enormous bridges had spanned the channel and, here and there, the black teeth of their supports still showed above the waves. By a strange twist of fate one graceful arch in the very center of the channel still remained, imposing but curiously incongruous and alone. The wreckage of a ground car, white with salt, still hung like a broken toy half on and half off the jagged lip of the bridge's twelve lane highway.

Across the channel, the destruction was even worse. Canals and winding areas of glassy slag crossed and re-crossed like the silvery trails of giant snails. The few buildings which had not melted to shapelessness were jagged and hooked like black fingers reaching from the earth and clutching desperately at nothing.

Gaynor leaned forward. "Believe it or not, there were surface survivors even here. They were mostly civil defense units and rescue squads. When the attack was over, they were rounded up, taken away and the area abandoned completely. It became, in all terms a write-off and was even deleted from civil reports."

"Is that what you were going to tell me?"

"Only part of it. This sector had one of the most efficient and comprehensive sub-surface shelter systems in the world. There may have been hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of survivors. The official report says that all shelters were checked and some few hundred survivors rescued but that's not the story that went round afterwards. The rumor was that large numbers of survivors were suspected beneath the surface but the Administration followed its usual policy of expediency. As is the case with most authoritarian systems it was rigid and quite unprepared to deal with hundreds of thousands of survivors. Mass evacuation would not only have weakened the creaking economy but revealed all the inefficiencies of supply and transport, not to mention all the corruption in the rationing of food supplies."

"And so?"

"So," and Gaynor's mouth tightened, "the shelters were sealed off and the entrances blown in. A team of experts checked the entire area from one end to the other sealing off possible air vents to make sure no one came out to tell about it."

He shook his head, his face grim. "There must have been a lot of truth in the story. The rumors were so persistent that the Administration had to extend their emergency powers. In the Americas there was a spontaneous uprising which took a week to put down and there was mutiny in several ships of the defense fleet." He shook his head again. "No, I don't think there can be any doubt that the story is true. I've been told that there is still a minor but permanent garrison somewhere in the area which makes regular check patrols. The story is, of course, that they are stationed there to locate and rescue the few odd surface survivors who evaded the early round up. That aspect of the story might be true. A few shocked or deranged survivors have been picked up from time to time. Somewhere they had found food stores or rationed stocks of canned supplies and had managed to live, after a fashion."

Gaynor' sighed and glanced downwards. "I lived here once, years before the war, fortunately I was too young to remember--" He stopped and changed the subject abruptly. "This was once one of the great production areas of the world--the times this sector has been knocked down and rebuilt. Man himself did a pretty fair demolition job but the Vrenka certainly showed us how it should be done, not that we didn't outdo them in our final attack." He turned suddenly. "Boiled down there's no damn sense in any of it. Is there an answer to all this madness, Duncan?"

The other looked at him thoughtfully. "All events have a cause and all human actions a motive. That's not an original observation but it's worth investigation."

"You think there are understandable causes?"

"When there is no true balance there are bound to be repercussions."

He paused. "I hinted once that the human body was out of tune. The same, with due respect, applies to his mental state. A man's mind should be precisely balanced between emotion and reason. In true order a man would consult reason before being swept away emotion. The emotion itself should be the force which vitalizes and empowers his considered action.

Bluntly, the race is unstable and out of balance. You consider this instability normal because you have met and experienced no other."

"I get your point but I'm not sure I care for it." Gaynor was frowning.

"Hell, you're telling me politely we're all nut cases."

Duncan looked at him directly and without smiling. "Mr. Gaynor, you're demonstrating my point admirably. You're allowing pride and resentment to overrule your intellect."

Gaynor flushed and shifted his feet uncomfortably. "I'll concede that round to you." He was honest enough with himself to see the truth when it was pointed out to him, then he grinned. "I could still punch your head with a little encouragement." He glanced out of the flyer and changed the subject. "They certainly want us to see this area."

"They also wish to remind me I was not here to fight. Nonetheless, they are rendering me a service. I am memorizing some very important land marks."

Gaynor frowned. "I'm not with you."

Duncan smiled. "Some time ago I found a somewhat dubious insect on your coat sleeve. I back-tracked the programme tapes to a thumb-size vehicle, rocket-type, forty miles beyond the city limits." He laughed. "Little fleas have smaller fleas upon their backs to bite 'em. In short, our insect took back a passenger which it brought here."

"Here!" Gaynor looked downwards then stared at the map.

The white spot was almost still, it rested directly on the printed words:

SECTOR BRIT Precinct Lond

The Administration had not been idle in Duncan's absence. They'd gone through the suite and laboratory with a fine tooth comb but results had been anything but rewarding.

They found a sealed container anchored in a magno-beam which they couldn't open and couldn't shift. This discovery did nothing to cheer them but there was worse to come. Sensitive instruments detected irregularities in one of the laboratory's air conditioners. It appeared to be running under its own power and was almost frictionless.

After some effort they managed to get it out of the wall but discovered another disconcerting feature.

"What the hell do you make of an air conditioner which blows out ten times more air than it sucks in?" asked a bewildered looking technician.

It was left to the top scientists to explain it to Kaft. They chose Langerman. He was a rebel but too brilliant to be disposed of yet.

"I'm afraid I can add very little to help." Langerman's tone suggested he didn't care much either way as far as present company was concerned but was clever enough not to let it show in his expression. "The device will not open to any instrument known to our science. Neither can our science stop it."

"Is that all you can tell us?" Statten's voice was abrupt and accusing.

Langerman blinked at him as if suddenly realizing he was alive.

"Er--yes, a correction. The device does not exhale ten times its intake of normal atmosphere. For every cubic meter of air it exhales exactly the same amount plus nine cubic meters of a completely unknown gas."

"Unknown?" Dowd half rose.

"Precisely. The gas is unknown both to this planet and to science. Its atomic structure defies analysis. It is incredibly light and, once released, the molecules rise instantly to the absolute limits of the atmosphere.

Enough of these devices working together could, presumably, rapidly form a blanket of this gas round the atmosphere itself."

"To what purpose?"

"I have no idea, Director Packman."

"Is the gas harmless?"

"Combined with sufficient atmosphere, quite harmless. Naturally, inhaled alone, it would cause oxygen starvation and consequent suffocation."

"Any other observations?"

"Yes the gas has one peculiar property. It causes curious refractions to direct light." Langerman paused and put his hand in his pocket. "One of my team found this outside the city. I could have brought dozens more but I thought one would be enough." He laid something

on the desk. "As you see, it is another air-conditioner but this one is the size of a walnut. Its output is proportionate to its size and, as near as I can tell you, all of them are doing some sort of atomic conversion job to produce this gas."

"How did they get there?"

"That I am unable to say. One must assume Duncan has some sort of transmitter to broadcast these things wholesale."

"Are you suggesting it's some sort of weapon?"

"No, Director, but I'm also quite confident Duncan is not broadcasting these devices for amusement."

The directors looked at each other without speaking, then Kaft leaned forward and touched a sense-plate. "Duncan has become a luxury we can no longer afford..."

Miles away the luxury flyer with its escort of security vessels turned abruptly for home. The two men were quick to notice the change.

"Looks as if the holiday is over." Gaynor managed to keep his voice casual.

"I was afraid it might be cut short." Duncan smiled. "I don't think we need worry, however, out here. They'll want us inside where nothing can go wrong--they think."

Varren, evidently, shared this opinion that nothing could go wrong.

"Well, well, I've been waiting for you. Nice holiday?" He was sprawled in a chair facing the door, his hand ostentatiously in the right hand pocket of his tunic.

"Varren, you talk too much." A squat bald man stood behind the chair evidently an assistant executioner.

Varren licked his lips. "Shut up. I've been waiting a long time for this.

I'm going to shoot his legs out from under him, see? I'm going to make this alien jerk eat dirt and like it." He paused then raised his voice. "Your time's run out, Duncan. Nobody loves you anymore, see?"

"Mind if I have a cigarette first?" Duncan crossed to the cigarette box.

Gaynor was never quite sure what happened after that.

He did not see Duncan throw the box but suddenly the bald man was falling backwards with blood streaming down his face.

Varren screamed, fired blindly and inaccurately, stumbled and tried to run for the door.

Duncan swung his fist. There was an ominous crunching sound and Varren halted in mid-stride and crumpled to the floor.

"My God!" Gaynor was, still numb with surprise. "Supposing they'd opened up as soon as we came in?"

Duncan shrugged, rubbing his knuckles. "That would have been too bad but I knew if Varren ran things he'd have to try to frighten me. He had to boast, you see. He had to gloat and he had to prove to himself he had the nerve to do the job."

Gaynor crossed the room and bent over the bald man. "Well, his face is a mess but he's breathing."

"Excuse me, I have some equipment to pick up." Duncan stepped over the prostrate body and entered the laboratory.

"You mean we might get out of here?"

"We might, I did make preparations for that eventuality." He emerged from the laboratory some seconds later. "We'd better take their weapons.

Varren come round yet?"

"He won't come round," Gaynor, kneeling by the crumpled body, looked shocked and disbelieving. He stared up at Duncan with something akin to fear. "You hit him with your bare fist and stove in the side of his head."

Strangely Duncan looked shocked and genuinely distressed. "I'm sorry.

It was an emergency, you see." He shook his head sadly. "I hit him just to stop him but I forgot how frail his body was."

"God!" Gaynor wiped sweat from his face, surprised to find he accepted the explanation. Then another thought occurred to him. "Duncan, honestly, are you human?"

The other looked up from his distressed contemplation of the still body and met Gaynor's eyes. "Yes, I am human, quite human but of a different order—one day you'll understand." He changed the subject abruptly. "I have to pick up one or two gimmicks and I'll need your help. We've got to get out of here fast."

Gaynor followed him without question, finding within himself a wondering confidence. He was, he realized, like a small boy watching his father control inexplicable and dangerous-looking

machinery. Duncan knew what he was doing. Somehow he had the whole business worked out.

Between them and escape from the building, were control barriers, detectors and twenty or thirty trained Security guards, yet...

Duncan closed the equipment box. "Right, shall we go?"

"You mean we're just going to walk out?"

"We are. If we meet anyone in the corridor just stand to one side and let them pass."

"We're invisible?"

"It's a little more subtle and confusing than plain invisibility. This gimmick slows down light and sound within a narrow field for a limited period of time. With luck, our delayed images, will walk along the corridor in approximately fifteen minutes. The resulting confusion and apparent invulnerability of our images should give us a head start. In time, of course, the techs will come up with the right answer but by then, I hope, we'll be well on our way. Let's hope our flyer is still on the roof park."

"Will that help us? Most transport works on a system of beamed power."

"Not when I've fixed it. I didn't spend hours delving into that taped library for nothing. All I have to do is to remove an inspection plate, rearrange a couple of circuits and she'll run on raw energy. Let's go." He strode towards the door.

Gaynor followed him. "Where the hell are we going, anyway?"

"Back where we came from to the jumping off point of our robotic fly."

He grinned. "Don't worry, our reception may not be exactly friendly but our unknown watchers think they can use us and, more important, they know we're coming."

Chapter Ten

IT WAS SOME little time before the Administration heard of the escape which was, perhaps, fortunate as they were already dealing with problems...

"Plague!" Statten's little eyes protruded slightly.

"Don't get alarmed." Kaft's voice was soothing. "A full report was sent in almost at once and Medicine has already come up with an answer. Conner will be up here soon with preventative injections."

"What about the Relethane? That's in our bodies almost from birth?"

"True, Relethane, is introduced into the bloodstream in infancy and protects the individual for life against all the major diseases.

Unfortunately, as in this case, nature has come up with a resistant strain."

Statten scowled. "Where did this thing start?"

"Sector Stralia. Fortunately a local medic took the law into his own hands. There have been thirty-three thousand deaths but all local."

"Stralia, that's Manson's sector, isn't it?"

"Was Manson's sector. Manson is dead. He was blown out of the sky trying to make a run for it."

"On whose orders?"

"The medic's orders, but for such emergency measures Manson might have brought the plague here."

Statten frowned. "A medic giving orders is all wrong."

"He'll be dealt with later but, at the moment, he's damn useful."

"That's what I call real gratitude." Rickman was bitter.

"It sets a precedent." Kaft's tone dismissed the point as of no consequence. "Another crisis and the whole medical branch will be throwing their weight around like security men. We shall commend the medic, of course, but we'll have to make an example of him later as a warning to the rest."

Rickman said, "Well, of all the--" Then wisely decided not to finish the sentence.

He was uneasily conscious of a curious lucidity of mind which had troubled him, on and off, for the past few days Rickman had trained himself to think within certain defined limits wherein introspection played no part, but of late...

This morning, for example, just after waking. It had seemed as if a mirror had been lowered suddenly in his mind and he had been unable to escape his own reflection.

Rickman hadn't liked the experience. The mirror had been flawless and the revealing likeness penetrating and inescapable. He had seen himself not in the dressing of his imagination but in a kind of revolting nakedness.

The public image of the hail-fellow-well-met but ineffective politician had vanished exposing a ruthless weakling. A hypnotic orator mouthing an endless stream of platitudes and given to long winded rhetoric.

Rickman had always liked to imagine himself as a man whose natural brilliance had carried him to the top. This uncontrollable introspection told him otherwise.

At best he was an inspired moron with all the qualities of a first-class parasite. His only skill, if such it could be called, was an intuitive faculty for recognizing an ascending star and clinging to it desperately as it went up.

When the first jockeyings for power had begun with the untoward disappearance of the last democratic minister, he had been quick to recognize the men of promise and had "clung" to them with the blind persistence of a leech.

This peculiar and, fortunately, short lived clarity of mind had shaken Rickman considerably. It was bad enough to be faced with one's self but the really disturbing part had been the inescapable realization of its truth.

He had been telling himself ever since that the reflection was distorted but affirmations lacked depth and conviction.

He had gone over to a real mirror and examined his reflection with alarmed intent. "It was not a bad face, was it?"

The new, clear-seeing self, however, thought very little of it. It was all right with its large public smile and even suggested an embracing, if slightly vacuous, geniality but relaxed the reddish, healthy face, was beginning to show the signs of rich living. The eyes were bloodshot, jewels were forming and the mouth slack and without character and as well, his solid body had a noticeable paunch. Even the graying hair at the temples which he had previously considered distinguished, now appeared to him as premature and faintly disreputable.

Rickman shifted uncomfortably, now that blasted clear-thinking was back. In his time he had hated, feared and despised a considerable number of people but it was the first time in his life when his entire resentment had been directed against himself.

"Rickman," he told himself miserably, "you stink--stink."

He became slowly aware that the door was open and that a white coated man had entered and was bowing politely.

"Everything is ready Supreme Director. If you will step this way."

"The fawning type" thought the new Rickman, sourly. "Down on his knees, licking the floor in case Kaft's shoes are defiled by a speck of dust."

He realized dully that a month ago he would have applauded Medic Conner's attitude as wholly proper. "I'll get over it," he told himself desperately. "Probably strain, maybe I ought to go out and get drunk or something."

He was so intent on his thoughts that he was almost surprised when he found himself in the next room.

Kaft was already full length on the operating table and two white coated men were carefully rolling back his sleeve. Another stood by with a plastic drip-feed while Conner officiated with all the unctuous politeness of an underpaid head waiter.

"What exactly is this stuff?" Even to himself Rickman's voice sounded off-key and unnatural.

"Stuff? Oh, you mean the basis of the injection." Conner bowed. "Well, briefly, Director Rickman, the injection stimulates the natural

defenses of the body, chiefly the white corpuscles, and this stimulation together with Relethane already in the blood stream, makes the body capable of dealing with any resistant micro-organism."

The politician scowled at him. "Has it been tested? It sounds like a rush job to me."

"In the limited time at our disposal Sir, tested to the limit. More than ten human guinea pigs have been injected and exposed to the invasion of deliberately mutated organisms. Not only were the test cases immune to these unnatural diseases but showed no dangerous reaction to the preventative injection."

Rickman frowned. Surely there had been a time when medicine had spent months even years of comprehensive tests before risking their discoveries on the human body? "In what way does it stimulate the white corpuscles?"

"The human body has grown lazy over the generations, Director Rickman, the injection reawakens the corpuscles for their natural task."

Sudden understanding seemed to come to Rickman like an inspiration.

"You mean it mutates them?"

Conner looked surprised and suddenly respectful. "You seem to have a quick grasp of essentials, Director. Yes, within certain limits, you are correct."

"Thank .you." Rickman turned away. Deep down inside him was the uneasy feeling--or was it a relic of superstition?--that there were limits to what could be done to the human body. Mutating a part of it,

even for its own defense, struck him not only as tricky but dangerous.

He looked at the milky fluid in the drip feed. He looked at Kaft and found himself shuddering but he was never quite sure which affected him.

Perhaps it was Kaft himself but most likely his arm. It was an ancient arm, white, withered and ribbed unpleasantly with distended bluish veins.

No doubt the rest of Kaft's body was equally repulsive and equally withered. Rickman looked at the arm and shuddered again. , "Do sit down, Director Rickman?" Conner was bowing and rubbing his hands beside him. "Only a few minute and it will all be over."

"It won't." Rickman his own voice seemed to come from very far away.

"To be candid, I pass."

"Pass!" Dowd's voice seemed to come booming at him like thunder.

"Whats' the matter, have you gone mad, Rickman?"

"Not mad, it's just a hunch, I think I'd prefer to take a chance..."

The hue and cry began quietly with a routine message to police and internal security forces but it grew with the passing of time, "Attention, Armed Services."

"World Defense. Emergency, emergency."

In underground operation rooms, needles danced on the faces of dials and banks of viewing screens lit up from within. Within eleven minutes the whole system of planetary defense was geared into a

single unit for the pin-pointing and destruction of one solitary flyer.

Many people thought secretly that the Administration panicked quickly and behaved like fools but if they were fools, the experts in their employ were not. Most of them were outstanding scientists with a wealth of war experience behind them. It took the experts in the main operations room exactly six minutes to figure out the apparent invulnerability of a single flyer and find precise reasons for the phenomenon.

"Delayed image." Cottew flicked off the pocket computer with the tip of his finger. "Just check these figures, Pullman. There's a discrepancy of fifteen minutes. This is new but not unbeatable, given enough time." He touched a sense-plate. "Harris, I want all the pertinent data on that flyer with the exception of thrust-power. Apparently the power source has been changed or we could have cut off the beamed power."

"Fifteen point O nine minutes." Pullman had the exact figures already.

The plate lit and Cottew touched it. "Harris?"

Yes--yes-fine--fine--exactly what I want--thanks." He turned to Pullman.

"The crate has been gimmicked but it's a luxury job and not built for high speed travel in the atmosphere. According to the friction-graphs of the model, anything over eight hundred will peel off the skin or throw too much stress on the frame. She'd have to go high to escape those dangers but if she wants to get away she'll have to stay low."

"Why low? She could kick over fifteen hundred in the stratosphere."

"Because Duncan isn't a fool. Height widens the scope of our

defenses and, from the point of view of perspective, narrows theirs. Think of six hundred guns in an arc. If the target is too damn close and going too fast you can bring none of them to bear. Pull your target out, however, and, relatively speaking, not only is he going slower but you can bring all your weapons to bear."

Pullman glanced at his watch. "Be dark in ten minutes, will it help him?"

"Very much the reverse. He's in a delayed-image field, even if he were fool enough to betray his position by using the flyer's radar, which, of course, he isn't, the radar is still inhibited by the field. To use a very ancient expression, Duncan is flying that kite by the seat of his pants or, if you prefer it, by sheer skill and dead reckoning. As he is pushing that thing along at close to seven-fifty at zero feet he must have super sight and impossible reflexes."

Pullman grinned faintly. "Somehow I can't help mentally raising my hat to him."

"Neither can I. But we've got to keep this impersonal." Cottew touched a button and the map in the center of the enormous operations table was thrown abruptly into vivid relief. "Last reported bearing"--he glanced quickly at his figures--"image, here." He leaned forward holding a stick of erasable rad-chalk. "Somewhere within this area." He drew a gleaming white circle, calculated some more and drew another circle within it.

"Inner circle for the image."

Pullman, leaning over his computer, pressed a number of switches. "A dead straight course at seven hundred and fifty miles an hour places him exactly on bisector sixty-one in forty-three point two nine seconds."

"Great." Cottew banged his fist on the nearest sense-plate. "Code battery, Molly--alert."

Muller, at the co-ordination firing board, said, "I have her linked--standing by."

Cottew glanced quickly at the master chronometer on the wall. "Gear her in on red six and time her down to fire on red eighteen."

"Red six," said Muller. Then, after a slight pause. "Counting now--ten--eleven--twelve--"

Cottew, watching the chronometer, was conscious of a strangely familiar feeling of tension. He'd done this so often in space but with the added terror of knowing that if he had miscalculated...

"Fifteen--sixteen--zero."

Miles away, Gaynor said, "God, that was too damn close for comfort. Do you think they're on to us?"

"Their calculations are good enough to need a change of plan. We'll stop. They may plot position on a change of course at the same speed. If we want to stay alive, we have to think one step ahead--ah!"

Miles ahead, in a rough arc, needles of white light lashed suddenly at the darkening sky.

"You were right." Gaynor was shaken. "It doesn't cheer me knowing that these damned automatic weapons are sunk into the ground all over the continent. It's a relic from the war, they were wise after the attack as usual."

Duncan nodded, brushing his fingers over a small control box in his

hand. "Thirty miles an hour for one minute, seventy for two, three hundred for one and half and a variable zig zag should get them working hard. Now for the image."

"I'd forgotten that part."

"I've had to keep my mind on it. In twelve minutes that image will stop as we have stopped and they'll know what measures we took. They will also know, because they are astute men, that they were close enough with that first try to make us take evasive action. So that image will have to alternate. In short I'm going to cut the field for brief periods. Long enough to get them wondering but not long enough for them to pick up the real flyer with instruments."

"Do you think we'll get clear?"

"We're not out of the woods yet. Our position may become more difficult to pinpoint but soon our general direction will be clear and they can concentrate along a probable route line. It may be some hundred of miles wide but it gives the air and space fleets something to work on." He glanced at his watch. "Ten minutes more and we'll be over the ocean and that's the real tricky part."

In the operations room Cottew had his tunic undone and was sweating profusely but inwardly he was enjoying himself. This was a game of wits he understood and he had played often in the operations section of capital ships. In those days, however, the game had been far more dangerous and almost as complicated. The Vrenka ships had had no confusing time/lag devices but they had other things: distorters which played hell with radar and the infamous refraction screen which totally deceived visual observation.

"No," he thought, watching the information screens. "Things even out."

Sooner or later, you get things stacked in your favor." The flyer had a tremendous technical advantage but there was only one flyer. Back in the war he'd had to handle the approach of twenty or thirty enemy ships coming in from all angles.

"Image gone," said a voice from one of the sense-plates.

The whole room was a babble of voices but long experience had endowed Cottew with a unique faculty of selective hearing.

"Did it fade or flick out abruptly?"

"It faded, sir."

"Damn, that suggests we missed him. Let me know if or when it appears again."

The answer came in eleven seconds. "It's back, sir, still at ground level but standing still."

Cottew swore again. With a fifteen minute time lag the real ship could be pushing seven-fifty again. Before he could begin to calculate, the image vanished for three seconds and reappeared.

Under his breath, Cottew exhausted his vocabulary of foul words but admitted to a grudging respect. This Duncan chap was a very smart man.

He frowned to himself. Until now everything had been impersonal and the enjoyment had been in skill and the application of control. Thinking back, he had never really hated the Vrenka, at least, not as reasoning beings or even as monsters. They had been dangerous, yes, but abstract dangers, figures on star charts, blobs on radar screens, degrees, angles, decimal points, but never, to his mind, personal entities.

He shook himself irritably and picked up the chalk again. Let's see, now.

He drew a jagged line away from the city--zi g-zag--ah--

"Pullman, come here a minute."

Chapter Eleven

PULLMAN CAME OVER quickly, flicking the pocket computer back to zero. "Important?"

"I think I've a lead. The position as I see it is this: Duncan is doing an alternate and, to my mind, a very clever one. He's doing a zig-zag at different speeds and, to confuse us, cutting the image briefly but there's one thing we've all overlooked—he must be going somewhere. A man of his caliber wouldn't make a blind run for freedom unless he had some sort of refuge in mind. Obviously, then, he's heading somewhere which, to him, represents concealment or safety. I don't think it's near enough to pinpoint yet but if we can plot a general route we might be able to block it."

"If not ahead, I'm level with you." Pullman pressed buttons at the side of the operations table which measured given angles, bisected map degrees and came up with carefully tabulated results.

After exactly eleven seconds with his computer he said, "Ah," and reached for the chalk. "Way out here." He drew two widely separated parallel lines across the map.

"Now we're getting somewhere." Cottew took an empty pipe out of his pocket and thrust the stem between his teeth. "Better still he's going out over the sea which for him is going to be damn dangerous."

"Here I'm way behind you. Why?"

"That device of his is far ahead of our technology but it can't perform miracles. It slows vision and sound so that we see what the flyer is doing fifteen minutes after it's done it but that is its limit. The flyer, the

real flyer, still has physical effects on its surroundings. It still pushes air out of its way at high speed although we have to wait fifteen minutes to hear the noise. Now"--Cottew took the empty pipe out of his mouth and frowned at the bowl--"when Duncan gets over the sea he must still fly low and the flyer will still push air out of its way--"

"I'm ahead of you now." Pullman looked excited. "Unless Duncan keeps that flyer to a virtual crawl, his progress is going to disturb the surface of the water. If he pushes that kite the surface disturbance will show up like the wake of a ship."

"Yes." Cottew thrust the pipe back in his pocket. "And, if he goes too slow, sooner or later, we can plot from the image, draw an arc, say somewhere along that line and plaster the whole length of it."

Pullman grinned. "Nicely tied up but in a way it's something of a shame, isn't it? I mean, he put up such a damn good show, it seems unsporting."

Cottew shook his head slowly. "This is not the age of sportsmanship."

He looked at the other with faint amusement. "A rabid sentimentalist in this set-up strikes me as incongruous."

Pullman laughed. "But for our long years of friendship I'd resent that."

He shook his head thoughtfully. "I must confess I do keep raising my hat to a man pushing that ship flat out at zero feet without instruments. His passenger must have passed out from sheer terror in the first few minutes."

"Passenger?" Cottew blinked at him. "I've had my head stuck in a research unit for weeks, haven't kept up with the news. All I know is the story of this Duncan and that he made a break for it in a flyer."

Who is this passenger--another near-alien?"

"Hell no, a reporter named Gaynor. From what I can gather from a number of conflicting reports they have, to quote, 'formed a traitorous alliance against the race.'"

"Gaynor?" Cottew pulled at his chin, frowning. "The name seems to ring a bell somewhere. Have I heard it before?"

"You may have read his articles or, more likely, heard of him during the war. He was the youngest major in the armed services and had quite a reputation."

"Not the bloke who knocked out those asteroid bases, is he?"

"That's the chap."

"Damn," Cottew said savagely.

"You know him?"

"Only by reputation. Those damn bases were a thorn in the Second Fleet's side. When he rubbed them out it left a blind spot in Vrenka detection ring and we slipped through." He made an irritable gesture. "I wish you hadn't told me, you've made the whole business personal and unpleasant."

"I'm sorry, I--"

"Skip it. It's not your personal issue but mine and whatever I do now is going to leave a nasty taste in my mouth." He laid his hand on a sense-plate. "Attention Squadron Control."

On the map, pinpoints of light began to move towards a given point and slowly to arrange themselves into two arcs.

Pullman frowned at his figures and at the map. "If we have this route correctly, he's boxed."

Cottew scowled at him and laid his hand on the sense-plate. "Image bearings, please."

"O-six, O-five, O-four, bearing eight-three, speed thirty-two point eight."

Cottew looked up slowly, his face looked strained but curiously resolved.

"He did say, O-eight, O-five, O-six, didn't he?"

"O--" Pullman met Cottew's direct gaze and stopped.

Briefly there was an unspoken understanding and agreement between the two men.

"Yes." Pullman's voice was firm. "O-eight, I heard it distinctly."

"Thank you." Cottew's gratitude was brief but obvious. He leaned forward quickly and drew an arc. "Squadron Fire Control, Section Nine, release on five. One--two--"

Over a hundred miles away, twenty square miles of ocean lurched suddenly as if struck by an enormous fist then geysered skywards in column of steam and boiling water. Long streamers of fog rose on either side nearly concealing the two hundred foot waves which rolled outwards from the center of the eruption.

A rush of wind caught the flyer, tossing it sideways like a piece of straw but somehow Duncan fought it back to an even keel.

"Hell." Gaynor picked himself from the floor and touched a growing lump on his forehead cautiously. "This is getting uncomfortably close."

"True, but it will give us a breather. This fog will conceal any surface disturbance for several miles."

Back in the main Operations Room, they waited tensely. The image had gone but both men were aware that this was no proof of the flyer's destruction. Duncan, knowing the explosion would render detection instruments ineffective for several minutes, had probably cut his device to add to the confusion and make another escape run.

Forty minutes later a voice said, "Attention control, aircraft or image, O-nine, O-four, O-two, bearing six-one. Speed six, six, one point O-seven."

Pullman frowned at the map. "He's certainly pushed it and if that's the image we'll have to start plotting the position all over again."

"I think not, gentlemen," said a soft voice behind him.

"Certain sections of the Administration are a little doubtful of your loyalty."

The two experts turned quickly, unconsciously clenching their fists.

The four men who had entered unnoticed smiled. "We trust there will be no disturbance." They were in plain clothes but two of them had their hands ostentatiously in their pockets.

Cottew turned an angry red then sighed resignedly. "There will be no trouble. Why should I provide your pleasure."

"That is not a wise remark. It has been noted and will be brought up

at the enquiry."

Pullman said, "Enquiry? What have we done?"

"That is not for us to say but depends on the findings of the Board. We were given to understand you would be charged with gross negligence or deliberate error, probably the latter."

Cottew glowered at them then shrugged. "Well that's nice. I hope you have someone handy to run this set-up."

"You need have no worries on that point. Technician Holmes has been placed in complete charge."

"Rayden Holmes?"

"Correct. Now, if you will be good enough to come quietly with us."

"Certainly." Cottew felt alarm but also a certain inward triumph.

Rayden Homes was a pro-Administration creep and probably regarded as a first-class Security risk but as a mathematician... Cottew, despite his position, fought down an inclination to chuckle. Oh, yes, Holmes had considerable skill in selling himself but when it came to the real thing, a thing like this, he couldn't plot the position of a stationary ground car on a straight road.

The officer in charge of Sector Squadron control was not an incompetent man. It was only that he lacked experience and that Rayden Holmes, now in charge of Operations Control, had overlooked one vital part of the pursuit. He had omitted to instruct the local Sector Controls to scramble or code their Squadron orders.

"Sector Italia, Sector Italia, all local squadrons. Strike bearing, O-four, O-six, O-two, degree four-three, fire on seven. One--two-- three--

-"

The officer in charge was blissfully unaware that he was providing the escaping flyer with all pertinent data on pursuit.

"Seventeen degrees off beam and twenty-five miles out of range," said Gaynor happily. "Fuzzy Wuzzy wasn't there-- wuzzy?" -

Duncan looked at him and winced slightly. "Is that a traditional joke or are you personally responsible?"

"Six--zero."

Twenty-five miles away needles of blue-white light lashed suddenly from the sky and the snow-capped peak of an inoffensive mountain exploded abruptly into glowing fragments.

"Sector Italia, image still visible, bearing--"

Gaynor shook his head becoming serious again. "Sector Italia, the last outpost of civilization. A few more minutes and we'll be reaching the D.A.

What then?"

Duncan smiled faintly. "Well, at least we'll be clear of embedded automatic batteries, not that we have so much cause for worry. I have a strong feeling that the pursuit was handed over to less competent men several hours ago."

Gaynor flicked the tip from a cigarette. "What do we do when we get there? Our mutual friends are not that incompetent and close enough to make it uncomfortable."

"My idea was to pre-set the controls, slow down for three seconds

and jump out. Our friends can then amuse themselves for several hours chasing and, if lucky, finally destroying an empty flyer."

Gaynor looked at him with respect. "Good aren't you?"

"Not that good, I underestimated the efficiency of the experts. They nearly got us twice. I made the mistake of judging them by the standards of the Administration and that error nearly proved fatal."

Gaynor shrugged. "We survived."

"True, but thank luck and hope it stays with us. We have new friends to meet."

Four hours later the flyer stopped a foot above an uneven area of glassy slag and they jumped out. Then there was a sudden rush of wind and the craft was gone.

Gaynor looked round him quickly and shivered. At close range the devastation was even worse than it appeared from the air.

They had landed in the center of an open space which might once have been a small park or public square ringed by small mountains of slag and the blackened shells of buildings. Here and there walls stood or leaned tiredly one against another forming blind openings which might have led anywhere. Many of the openings were half-sealed where plastic had run molten and slowly cooled. Near many of the higher walls were fantastic rows of stalactites and stalagmites like brown and needle-sharp icicles.

Gaynor shivered again. "You sure we're at the right place?"

Duncan had no time to answer the question.

"Right on the button," said a pleasant masculine voice.

Gaynor turned, startled. There was no living being within sight.

"Don't look so alarmed, Mr. Gaynor," said the voice. "Directional audio beams are not new. Oh, yes, we have reason to believe you relieved your ex-guards of their arms, throw them away, please. Thank you. By happy circumstance you are facing the right way, would you be good enough to walk straight ahead. Briskly, please, our friends up there are not exactly hanging about you know. Left a little. Excellent. Yes, between those two walls--"

The two walls leaned against each other and had fused together at the top forming a tunnel. Inside it grew dark and they went forward cautiously but suddenly there was light.

"Welcome, gentlemen." A young blond man was putting away a directional microphone. He wore a light tunic, very brief shorts and sandals as if dressed for the tropics.

Gaynor stiffened, realizing that they were surrounded by armed men similarly dressed.

The blond man made an apologetic gesture. "Sorry, natural precaution." He smiled again. "Welcome to the underworld. I have a strong feeling my name should be Orpheus or perhaps someone better known and grimmer but, alas, I am only here to conduct you to the Mayor.

This way, please."

A section of wall slid silently to one side revealing a downward sloping and brightly lighted corridor.

As they entered, the armed men close behind them, they were both conscious of a warm fresh breeze blowing in their faces.

Gaynor looked at the guards, they were dressed alike in tunic and sandals and all seemed young. They all wore, he noticed, a peculiar flash on the right hand shoulder of their tunics, larger than, but similar to those worn by the officers of ancient land armies. There was a matching flash indelibly marked on the flesh of the right arm slightly above the wrist.

The markings themselves appeared to consist of colored symbols although none of the men appeared to have matching symbols.

Gaynor shrugged mentally and gave it up. Obviously the shoulder and arm flashes did not denote rank but might indicate technical qualifications. The men looked healthy, well-trained and highly efficient.

He realized suddenly that he was curiously untroubled. Although surrounded by guards he felt almost free. The sense of oppression that the security guards induced was somehow lacking. Perhaps these people were different.

They reached a broad tunnel which was almost a highway and the blond man indicated a blunt-nosed transparent vehicle some twelve feet in length. "Step inside please."

A few pedestrians passing along the tunnel glanced at the prisoners and the escort curiously but without hostility. They, too, Gaynor noticed, wore shorts and tunics although there was a wider range of color. All, including the women, wore wrist and shoulder flashes.

He lowered himself into the slightly sloping seat and the door slid shut as the last man climbed in.

The vehicle rose and appeared to stop an inch from the tunnel roof.

There was a lurch and suddenly they were rushing silently forward.

Gaynor realized that speed in a narrow tunnel could be deceptive but it appeared colossal. The walls blurred, corners and tunnel intersections raced at them and were gone yet the vehicle still hung an inch from the roof as if glued to an invisible rail.

Finally the vehicle stopped with startling suddenness but undetectable recoil and the door slid open.

"This way." Their blond guide indicated a narrow corridor apparently terminating in a blank wall which slid to one side abruptly as they approached.

"I'm sorry, but I'm standing behind you with a drawn gun." The man's voice was still pleasant. "If the Mayor thinks you're all right I'll put it away. Forward, please."

They found themselves in a small but comfortably furnished room. A man sprawled comfortably in an old fashioned easy chair looked up as they entered.

Gaynor was struck by him instantly, like Duncan he seemed to radiate something—character and, what was it, power or determination? He rose, but physically he was not unusual. He was tall, thin and almost willowy in his movements. The mouth was long, humorous, the eyes dark and the skin brown and healthy. The graying, rather lank hair was parted at the side but had a tendency to fall untidily over his forehead.

"Welcome, gentlemen." The voice was deep but not unpleasant. "All right, Trace, you may go." He smiled as the door slid shut behind them.

"My name is Sebastian, Paul Sebastian. They call me the Mayor but

don't let the title deceive you. I am probably one of the most benevolent and, at the same time, one of the most ruthless dictators the world has ever seen. I will therefore begin by laying my cards on the table. Mr. Duncan, I am not prepared to barter. You returned to this world on a mission which, so far, you have kept to yourself. I want to know the full scope of that mission and what it will do to the race. You will tell me your entire scheme frankly and in detail or I shall order your immediate execution. There are no 'buts.' "

To Gaynor's surprise, Duncan smiled.

"I shall be happy to answer you frankly but, with due respect to Gaynor, in private. There are special reasons for privacy which I feel sure you will understand."

The Mayor nodded. "You seem sincere but it is only fair to tell you that should anything happen to me, you and your entire community will be dead in eleven seconds. This way." He made a brief movement with his hand and a dark-haired man entered.

"Michael, entertain Mr. Gaynor in my absence. I have a private matter to discuss with our visitor."

Chapter Twelve

MICHAEL--GAYNOR never discovered whether it was a first or second name--was an alert, intelligent man with bright dark eyes.

"Entertain? What the hell does that mean? Do sit down, old chap.

Comfortable? Good. Perhaps you have some ideas?"

Gaynor digested the flow of words. "I'd like to ask some questions if that's in order."

"Delighted, my dear chap. In point of fact, I am a historian, an expert on our brief but colorful history. Anything you want to know about our society, I have the answer. True, it may not be the right answer but it will be near enough for you to get an outline. Go ahead."

"Well, I'd like to know not only how you managed to survive but, having survived, continued to function as a community. It must be quite a story."

Michael smiled but he was suddenly serious. "Well, as you know, in the middle of the war or just about eighteen years ago, we got well and truly clobbered. In this Sector, however, it was not a new experience. Our remote ancestors were getting their share of air attack long before man got into space. We had, therefore, generations of bitter experience and a hell of a lot of recorded know-how. Call that item one. Item two, was what I choose to call a population asset. On this planet we had one of the greatest concentrations of people ever collected into single area.

Accommodation, therefore, was one of the greatest social problems of the entire Sector. It was solved by digging down as well as

building up. If we put up a twenty story tenement, only ten of those stories appeared above ground so you will see our local underworld began long before the coming of the war. Item three, beneath this underworld lay at least two thirds of our industrial strength, auto-factories, construction plants and so on to conserve surface space. Even below this ran the tunnels of the largest, the most efficient and, incidentally, the most complicated transport system in the world."

Michael paused and grinned. "You can put the rest together for yourself. At the first hint of war, the old know-how was put to use and the Sector prepared for major attack. When it came, we were almost ready."

"Surely the Administration knew this?"

Michael grinned wickedly. "They knew part. This Sector is old but wise and saw the writing on the wall well in advance. Our top men had a highly efficient resistance organization in being long before the last democratic minister was helped to jump off a roof. When the inevitable happened and the rat-race began, the resistance organization was well concealed and ready."

Michael paused, then continued. "The Administration, like a lot of regimes in history, was completely merciless but in many ways too damned smart for its own good. One example which helped us greatly was its policy of appointing its security forces from other sectors. This policy achieved its aim of avoiding sector loyalties but denied their best men the very thing an efficient police system requires--local contacts. We were, therefore, in just the right position to proudly display those parts of, our shelter system we wanted them to see--in short, about one tenth. We also decorated the surface with large numbers of impressive-looking but purely decorative air-vents."

Michael paused and laughed softly. "When our new masters took

office they were treated not with resentment but a surfeit of rich living. The most lavish suites in the Sector were provided for their use all of which, by curious coincidence, were at the very top of the highest buildings in the Sector. I am not suggesting for one moment that our blokes were prophets. They just wanted to be sure that if anything did happen the best people bought it first."

Gaynor thought about it. "I suppose you've no idea why Sector U.S. never followed suit. You had many ideas in common."

"True, very true. Their record of individual resistance was, and still is, far higher than ours but they lacked the one great asset of an operation like ours--concentration. They had a far larger population but spread over a far greater area. Four men close together can dig a single hole far quicker than four hundred men a mile apart. Then, of course, they had no underground system like ours or the doubtful privileges of being clobbered by aliens and then officially entombed by one's own race. The Vrenka did us a favor, you know, they erased our oppressors and gave us independence."

"How many survived?"

"Twelve and a half million. We now number sixteen million."

"Good God, just how big is this underground city?"

"It goes down seventeen levels and now extends nearly to our South Eastern coastline."

Gaynor shook his head slowly, fumbled in his pocket and produced an empty packet. "Ah, well."

"Try one of ours." Michael tossed him one. "They're not superb but they don't turn your ears green like your brands. In the first place

they're not synthetic and in the second we have manufacturing standards. No, there's no tip, just suck in a couple of times. If you are fortunate enough to join our community you'll get forty a week basic."

"Basic?"

"Unlike the Administration we maintain the aged and physically unemployable. For these there is the basic: free accommodation, food, beamed entertainment and a few minor luxuries."

"Your economic system seems well worked out."

"Our economic system is not only unique but revolutionary. Basically, of course, it is not new, being dependent on productive capacity. But no one, in all history, has ever come up with an abstract monetary system. We have an intangible, personal exchange system which cannot be manipulated and cannot be stolen." Michael paused and grinned apologetically. "Sorry, call it community pride, I'm apt to wax over-enthusiastic, but don't be deceived, I am proud. We all are. Imagine what it was like in the first three years, with men, women and children sleeping in shifts because of space conservation. Everything was rationed, water, food, clothing materials, and even oxygen. Manual, technical and medical people got normal atmospheric content, but now," Michael's smile of triumph seemed to light his face from within, "there is no rationing. We have adequate space and better still we have real know-how.

By nuclear engineering we can draw air, food and water from the naked rock. We can take our waste products and transform them into consumer goods. We are technically and economically independent of everything but our unyielding determination to improve." He laughed. "Yes, I know I'm bragging but we have only one form of government with which to compare ourselves. Our efforts make the opposition machinery look like a lot of rusted spares tied

together with string."

"That I believe." Gaynor nodded quickly. "The Administration is so terrified of its own shadow that it is programing some of its best men."

"I agree up to a point but in that respect it would be unwise to take the narrow view. The Administration, in this sphere, is singularly efficient and far-seeing instrument of policy. Have you considered that in five years the Administration will have ten million organic robots quite single-minded and incapable of revolt. In ten years it will have thirty million, fanatically determined to do what they're told and, for that matter, incapable of doing otherwise."

"You've never thought of a showdown?"

"Often, but Mayor Sebastian is an astute man. One of his favorite ideas is that too many regimes have been destroyed by ambition so we sit tight and prepare. Numerically of course our position would be hopeless but our friends would pay a prohibitive price for victory. Don't go away with the idea that couple of solar bombs would settle us forever. Before those bombs could hit us thirty of their major cities would be smeared out of existence." Michael shook his head slowly. "Yes, I know I sound bitter. It's something you have to experience before you can understand. Imagine what it was like down here, listening to the explosions, the enormous machines and knowing what they meant. Your own race was callously writing you off, ridding themselves of an economic embarrassment, burying you alive without so much as a prayer." He stopped as if listening and rose abruptly. "Come on, we're wanted." He paused as if listening again and suddenly smiled. "Tell me, Mr. Gaynor, how would you go for a long cool beer? I gather there's going to be some sort of celebration."

Medic Connor was obviously ill at ease and maintained his professional assurance by an effort of will.

"You are quite sure you feel perfectly well, Director Rickman?"

"Perfectly well, candidly I've never felt better."

"I see." Conner didn't but it went against his interests and profession to say so. He had made a thorough examination of the director and his findings only supported the other's claim--Rickman had never been in better shape in his whole life.

Conner held up a small test tube. "You felt no ill effects such as nausea or dizziness when you excreted this liquid?"

"None at all. It was only the peculiar color which made me decide to call you in for a check-up."

Conner said, "I see," with a kind of mental blankness. The whole business was not only without precedent it was insane. He had no answer at all because there was no answer. He debated with himself. Better be honest or outwardly so, particularly with Rickman. Rumor had it he was small-brained and apt to take a lie as a personal insult to his intelligence.

Worse, he had a long and unpleasant memory. Yes, yes, better be frank.

"I had better tell you what this liquid is, Director." He held up the test tube. "It's Relethane. You know its existence in your bloodstream is protective, I take it? Quite candidly, Director, I have no idea why your body chose to excrete it. This form of protection has been in use for several generations and there is no record of the body disposing of it."

Rickman shrugged, surprised to find himself curiously indifferent. "One of those things."

"Ah, yes, quite." Conner sounded fatuous and knew it. "You will need reProtection immediately."

Rickman frowned at him. "No, I don't think I will."

"But, Director, your position, your personal safety--"

"To hell with it. I feel far better without it."

"But, Director, you could fall prey to--"

"No doubt, no doubt." Rickman thrust the inevitable cigar between his teeth. "Everyone thought I would go down with the plague in a couple of days but it never happened. Anyway, the infection seems to be dying out, dropping by seventy a day and only one case in fifty proving fatal."

"It reached Sector U.S. Sir."

"True, but as mild as they come, some of the cases had no idea they were ill." Rickman puffed smoke. "You worry too much, Conner."

"Yes, sir." Conner looked at him and wished he could define just how the other had changed. It was not only physical although that was baffling enough, there was something else, something keen and discerning in the personality which had never been there before. In truth, thought Conner, wondering at his mental temerity, Rickman has always been a loud overbearing lout but now...

The politician was also deep in thought. There was one symptom--if such you could call it--which he had omitted to mention to the Medic and that was his nose. Not that he could find anything the matter with

it.

There was no soreness or congestion and yet, well, to put it frankly, something stank. The smell was not there all the time but when it did, now, for example, there was a faint but clearly discernible putrid smell as if something had "gone off" somewhere which, of course, was ridiculous.

Plumbing odors had ceased to exist long before the discovery of nuclear energy and the suite's air-conditioners detected and removed odors before they could enter. The smell, therefore, was imagination-he hoped.

"I'm afraid I must refer your decision to the Supreme Director, Sir."

Conner looked nervous but determined.

"You do that." Rickman waved his cigar. "Natural, got to cover yourself in case of accidents." He glanced at his watch. "Can't hang around here any longer, urgent meeting."

"Yes, Director. Thank you. Thank you very much." Conner withdrew, bowing.

It was only twelve seconds after his departure that Rickman realized that the "smell" had gone with him. Yes, now he came to think of it, that meeting yesterday... No, ridiculous, everyone didn't smell, particularly Dowd who was most careful of his bodily hygiene. The fault, therefore, lay in his nose or in his imagination--which?

When he entered the conference room, however, the smell was back stronger than ever. Did Kaft have some cheese somewhere?

"We got them." Statten looked shriveled, beady-eyed and gloating. "It took a little time but we got them in the end."

Kaft waited until Rickman was seated then pricked the bubble. "We destroyed the ship, General. As yet there is no evidence that the fugitives were in it."

"God be praised for pessimism." Dowd looked venomous. "We must have got them. Where the hell could they have gone? It cost enough to do the job. Not to mention that idiot from Sector U.S. who shot down the wrong ship."

"The idiot," said Kaft, softly, "has been programed. The ship which was clearly marked belonged to a sub-director. There are far too many "idiots"

in this sector and it was necessary to set an example by including his family and friends."

He folded his thin, pink hands. "To return to the subject, ' to assume the fugitives were in the ship is premature. At the height they flew, they could have stopped the vessel briefly and jumped out almost anywhere."

Statten thrust out his chin aggressively but a section of Kaft's desk lit and he was compelled to wait while the other took the message.

"Good morning, Director Kaft."

They all heard the voice clearly although the normal audio-frame devices should have confined it to his immediate hearing.

"Good morning, gentlemen." The voice was not only cheerful but insolently familiar. "No, no, Director, you can't shut me off so don't try.

This is Paul Sebastian speaking. You don't know me but I know you, so it might be wise to listen." There was a slight pause. "We thought

you'd like to know we have Duncan safe and sound. We thought you'd like to know that we intend to keep him."

Rickman, strangely detached and clear-headed, saw the knuckles whiten on Kaft's thin hands.

"Who are you?"

"Does it matter? The point is, however, we are first-class psychologists.

We know, whatever we say, or whatever threats we make, you will try and find him. Literally and politically you cannot afford not to find him, so you will gear everything to that end. Sooner or later your experts will tell you where he is and where I am but, although we cannot stop you, Kaft, we can impose restrictions on how you do it. Don't come looking for Duncan with a solar bomb. We will not permit the kind of madness which could destroy the entire planet. We warn you, therefore, one hint of a solar weapon and we will burn you and your precious city to the ground."

"Bluff." Kaft's voice was so tense that the single word sounded clipped and brittle.

"You think so? We can see you, we can see your city. You, too, can see most of it. Choose a point."

"Many men with minor advantages have spoken too often and too loudly." Kaft had recovered from his surprise and regained his outward composure. "Any fools with a missile and a certain amount of training can hit a given point but I must warn you our tracer system here is first-class.

Before your missile strikes this city, its launching point will be pinpointed and a hundred counter missiles will be on the way to that

site."

"You are a crude and unimaginative man. You interpret power in terms of mass rather than in efficiency."

Kaft's mouth turned into a bloodless line but he kept his temper. "I feel tempted to call your bluff, Mr.--Sebastian."

"You name it, we'll burn it."

"Very well. On the opposite building, and visible from my office, is a latticed directional tower for air traffic control. Its destruction would offer very little danger to innocent people except of course the instigators. As I have said, we have a first-class tracer system--"

"Mouthy upstart." Dowd strode to the window. "I'd just like to--" He stopped and there was a strained silence.

"It must be some sort of trick." Statten's words were so run together they sounded like a gibber.

Rickman, staring past Dowd, felt a constriction in his stomach. The directional tower was a tangle of latticed wreckage broken in half and leaning drunkenly to one side.

The voice supplied the coup de grace. "Thank you, gentlemen. Oh, incidentally, we know why Duncan came to Earth--"

Chapter Thirteen

"WE THOUGHT YOU should see all that, at least before proceeding further." Sebastian smiled.

"It must have shaken their sense of security." Gaynor stubbed out his cigarette.

"Theirs yes. They are incompetent men, but not their technicians. I find it deplorable but encouraging that the Admininstration has so much talent and so little skill in employing it. Another beer, gentlemen?"

"This tastes," said Gaynor, carefully, "really like beer."

"It is beer, my friend. We do our own fermenting and there is no metallic content whatever. I must warn you however that once you become a member of our community you will find it prohibitively expensive and will seldom be able to afford it. Costs are related to space, you see, and fermenting vats are area-consuming."

He paused and raised his glass. "Gentlemen, we are prepared to accept you both into our community providing you are prepared to submit yourselves to the necessary molding."

Gaynor felt a stiffening inside him. "Just how do we do that?"

"Don't look so alarmed, Mr. Gaynor. We educate you into our culture and instruct you as to its functions. Let me be more explicit: you will have noticed we all wear shoulder flashes. You must, to fit into our society, understand and be able to read the shoulder flashes of every individual in the community. This is the educational side and you will be tutored completely in deep hypnosis. There is no programing and

no attempt to coerce the personality. You will be exactly the same as now save that you have acquired necessary and comprehensive information. Secondly, and not under hypnosis, we shall require your presence with the psychiatrists.

The session will take about four hours and consists of intense questioning which is required for assessment. After which, you too, will be presented with a shoulder flash and wrist markings."

"You mean--" Gaynor was a little stunned and forgot to finish the sentence.

Sebastian finished it for him. "Exactly, Mr. Gaynor, in this community we wear our hearts or, more aptly, our characters on our sleeves."

Gaynor thought about it. After a time he swallowed and said uncertainly, "Suppose I'm a damn crook?"

"Then you'll have an admirable advertisement for your talents, won't you? Not only will you have to live with it but it will be impossible to deceive those you meet. Not that you will be disliked. This is a free community. People will just be more careful with their valuables, that's all.

We encourage people to face themselves and later you will see how well it works."

"A man or woman can be anything?"

"We restrain only violence, sadism and attitudes of mind which might betray or destroy the community. This we do by psychiatric means and is quite harmless. Any questions?"

"Yes." Duncan was frowning. "I'm afraid I raise a problem, I'm a hypno-resistant."

Mayor Sebastian frowned and looked thoughtful. "Usually I enjoy a real problem but this one floors me."

Duncan frowned at the floor then looked up. "I take it you keep records of these symbols and their associations?"

"Of course, otherwise the system could not be applied."

"They could be shown on a reader?"

"Yes."

"Very well then," Duncan smiled. "The solution is simple enough. I'll learn them."

"You'll what!" For the first time Sebastian seemed to lose some of his urbanity. "Good God, man, there are thousands."

"These thousands can be arranged into hundreds of thousands of linkages and associations. To show them singly or in groups would probably take two days. It's an impossibility."

Duncan laughed. "Are you a gambling man, Mr. Sebastian?"

The other looked at him then his mouth twitched. "It's a bet, I'll give you two days, a reader and a private room. After that you'll have to submit to some stiff questioning. Personally, I still think it's an impossibility, even for you, to memorize the lot."

An hour later Michael conducted them to their temporary living quarters. It was a small but comfortable room with two beds and every article of furniture was ingeniously recessed. Despite its smallness, the general appointments suggested luxury class living. One wall consisted of a wide artificial window which had been

cleverly contrived to give the impression of a spacious garden beyond. There were lawns, trees, a winding path and a small lake. Pressure on a "S" button brought the sound of rustling leaves and a faint bird song. They learned later that the light changed with the passing hours from dawn to sunset.

"I'm weary." Gaynor sat on the edge of the bed and slid off his shoes.

"Did you tell him the truth?"

Duncan hesitated. "Yes. Yes I did."

"All of it? You sounded doubtful."

"Not doubtful--uncomfortable. You see, I have told you only a very small part."

"Don't let it worry you. I am slowly becoming reassured." Gaynor sounded sleepy.

"Perhaps, but I'd prefer you to understand. In the first place, there was no intimidation. In the second, he is the only man I have met on this planet capable of receiving the full truth with all its implications. Our friend Mayor Sebastian is the nearest thing to a superman this planet has ever produced."

"Superman!" Gaynor was suddenly wide awake again. "What does that word mean, exactly?"

"Not quite the mental picture. Sebastian is the rare example of an intelligence determined to function despite extreme pressure. One could draw a parallel with a cripple who, by sheer guts, has almost succeeded in overcoming his disabilities."

Gaynor frowned. "You mean--I haven't?" Duncan shook his head

slowly.

"You see how difficult it is for me to tell all the truth. If I said yes, you would naturally resent it."

Gaynor flushed slightly. "I'll concede the point but see how much I can take."

"Very well, the difference between the average man-- which includes you--and Sebastian hinges on one factor. Paul Sebastian recognizes his disabilities."

"Disabilities--what disabilities?"

Duncan smiled gently. "I suggest we leave it there for the time being.

Within the next few months you will note certain changes. When they begin to trouble you I may be able to explain."

Gaynor scowled at him. "What is this, some sort of all-embracing scheme for the betterment of the race? If it is I'm not sure I like it. Sounds as if you intend to programme the race into virtue."

"Sorry, it's neither so complicated nor paradoxically so simple. I have but one part to play, to defeat an ancient enemy who, in a few more years would have destroyed the race completely."

Gaynor glared at him then almost smiled. "Fortunately I'm tired, too tired to blow my top over riddles."

Sleep, however, was long in coming. The riddles grew with thinking until nothing made sense. He forced himself to concentrate. Duncan was a superman but claimed normality. If the claim was true--which seemed unlikely--what of the rest of mankind?

Gaynor shifted uncomfortably in his bed. He was getting the same answer as Duncan. Again, this business about an enemy at which Duncan had hinted more than once and made no sense at all. Only the completely educated idiot thought that victory proved something conclusive. Oh yes, you could knock a man down because you disagreed with his views but that sort of superiority convinced no one. It did not prove your own views were superior. Nor did it mark you as a better man, rather the reverse--

What sort of victory in this day and age marked up a profit for the winner? The days of vast booty and territorial gains were too far in the past to remember. There was but one token of victory in this age--survival.

What was Duncan going to do anyway--fight this enemy alone or recruit a few million others to help him? No, come to think of it, he'd firmly denied ends like that.

Under his breath Gaynor swore horribly and tried again to sleep.

"I assume I have lost my shirt." Sebastian laid the report to one side.

"Frankly, I thought the task of committing all those symbols to memory was too much even for you, but my psychiatrists are quite satisfied so I must admit I was wrong." He smiled and changed the subject. "You told me that the preliminary work was done, should there be any visible effects yet?"

"Visible effects, no. It is possible, however, particularly in tropical or semi-tropical zones. Some reactions may be becoming apparent."

"I see." Sebastian pulled at his chin thoughtfully. "And once this process begins it will be swift?"

"Very swift. To many it will look as if the world is falling to bits round

their heads. Fortunately to you and a few others, who will know exactly what it means, it will appear less alarming."

"How long would we have had before--"

"A year, perhaps, no more. The plague was the beginning."

"It sounds as if you acted just in time. Tell me, in view of what you knew, didn't you feel repulsed by your reception or at least despairing of mankind?"

"I was distressed but I had to remain detached. A wholly distorted growth cannot be cured, one accepts it as inevitable. Perhaps mercifully, I was not given the power to see which was truly malevolent and which was not. We shall all be in for some surprises. Some, of course, were so patently victims of circumstance and external pressure that it made everything worthwhile." He paused and looked at the other thoughtfully. "I suppose you know about Hengist? I feel a personal responsibility for his misfortune. Kaft was so wide open for needling that I quite forgot he might take it out on a witness."

"You liked Hengist?"

"Let us say I saw through his shell and liked the potential behind it."

Sebastian nodded. "I'm inclined to agree. We keep files on most of their people and his record is almost clean. He did a straight bodyguard job and never stepped beyond it. No sadism, no corruption and no informing." He paused and looked at the other directly. "What had you in mind? Pulling him out?"

"If I could I would, but I'm afraid it's impossible."

"Not that impossible. Four hundred of our best people were once

Administration employees. We thought we could use them better so we arranged a disappearance, you'd be surprised at facilities we have for a job like that. It's true, of course, they were not guarded like you." He smiled. "Why don't you pay a call on the Guild of Adventurers. I'll give you their address. They might be able to help you."

Duncan shook his head. "No, I'm sorry. I couldn't ask anyone to take a risk like that to salve my conscience."

Sebastian laughed. "You don't understand, do you? Our society is based on psychological honesties not on ideals. Men join the G.O.A. because they are what the name implies-- adventurers. They are not interested in your conscience or for that matter its immediate ends. All that would interest these people is action and the degree of hazard. This type of mind lives by challenge. It relishes the supposedly unclimbable peak. The guild might like this one because they have never pulled a programmed zombie from the Administration underworld. Why not put it to them? It's entirely up to them whether they do it or not."

Duncan shook his head. "They might be swayed by the author of such a proposal."

"It can go on their weekly agenda anonymously. The suggestion would then be considered on its own merits and you need have no qualms if it is accepted."

Duncan's face looked both relieved and bewildered. "I'll be glad when I understand this community. With due respect, from my vantage point, it looks like a brilliant example of organized eccentricity."

Sebastian laughed, quite unoffended. "Many a true word is spoken in

jest. Let's take a look at it. Incidentally, and while on the subject of eccentricity, no one will ever take your shoulder flash seriously. In the first place the integrity symbols are high above normal standards and they certainly don't mesh in with your type of creative ability. As for the I.Q.

figures, I was compelled to ask the psyches to tone them down a little or write "superman" in large letters across your chest. In the end, they saw the wisdom of my words and agreed to tone them down."

Duncan grinned at him. "I congratulate you on your modesty. Have you looked at your own symbols recently?"

"I look at them constantly to be candid. The real strain is trying to live up to them--this way."

Just outside the door was one of the now familiar projectile-shaped transparent vehicles.

"Where would you like to go first?"

"I think I'd like to study your observational techniques."

"Step in, we're not three minutes away."

Observation room (One/S) was a long room with high walls which were covered with long six foot reflectors.

"Disillusioning, isn't it?" Sebastian smiled apologetically. "The old, old techniques of refractory and periscopic observation. We have, however, good sound reasons. Any kind of radar-based spy-beam is detectable and would betray us instantly. Nonetheless we have brought these ancient techniques to a fine art, particularly in magnification and night observation. The commander of the old-time submarine would have sold his soul for instruments like these." He

beckoned one of the technicians who were moving quietly round the room. "Our guest would like to take a look at the surface, please."

"Certainly, sir. If you'll come this way."

They followed him to one of the reflectors. He made some adjustments and stood back.

Duncan was startled. The reflected image was so perfect that it gave the eerie impression they were standing on the surface among the ruins.

"The periscope eye is concealed in one of the stalagmites," said the technician with obvious pride. "The complete picture is brought to you through an aperture slightly smaller than the head of a pin."

Sebastian said, "I don't know if you know it but the opposition has a small garrison over to the west. There are also a large number of one-man observation posts at regular intervals throughout the D.A."

"I understand there were large numbers of surface survivors at one time."

"There still are. That is the real reason for the garrison. A great number have been caught or killed but the wily ones still evade the patrols."

"How do they live?"

"There were still a large number of surface, or basement, stores or warehouses. Many contained concentrates, preserves, canned protobread and things like that. Obviously some of those stores have been found or there would be no survivors." He sighed. "We brought in all the women and children we could find, but after a year or two there was little we could do for any surviving adults. We used to bring

them in at first, but many were deranged and all suffered a convulsive claustrophobia as soon as we got them inside. They had grown used to the surface and preferred it--despite its risks and discomforts--to the feeling of constriction down here."

"Do they live in communities?"

"Oh no. Deranged or not, they are far too cunning for that. A group is far more easily detected by instruments than, a single individual and these people know it. They have become, in consequence, complete individualists who live and travel alone."

Sebastian paused and shook his head thoughtfully. "It's strange. Some seem to follow regular circuits and pass through this area at more or less predictable times. Many of them, perhaps a little callously, we know by nicknames: One Eye, Mad Mark, Trembling Tim, Dirty Dora, and so on.

Many of these nomads are glimpsed but never seen again. But as I say we have our regulars."

One of the technicians came over and joined the small group round the screen.

"Excuse me, Mayor Sebastian, but I couldn't help overhearing part of your conversation as I passed just now. I thought you might like to know we've got a beautiful picture of one of the regulars on reflector seven."

"Fine. Well come over."

The technician strode ahead and began to make swift adjustments as they approached.

"Wonderful. Conditions are perfect." He turned. "There you are

gentlemen. I'm afraid she's not very pretty but then none of them are.
We call this one Krazy Kate."

Chapter Fourteen

KRAZY KATE SAT between two huge piles of rubble eating preserved syntha-meat from a plastic container. She ate slowly and with evident relish, pushing the meat into her mouth with her fingers.

As the technician had remarked, Kate was not pretty. The lank black hair was so coated with dust it was almost white and the skin of the face was black except round the mouth where the greasy fingers had wiped it partly clear of dirt.

Her clothing consisted of a tunic-type uniform which was a mass of shreds. Round her shoulders and fastened at the throat were the tattered remains of something which had once been a ceremonial cloak. Its tatters swung and twisted incongruously every time she moved like a coat of monkey tails.

Krazy Kate finished the meat, licked the inside of the container, sucked her fingers carefully and wiped them dry on her clothing.

All her movements, Duncan noticed, were jerky and uncertain as if there were some lack of co-ordination between muscle and brain.

The woman half rose, winced, limped a few steps and sat down again.

She leaned forward and very gingerly pulled up the leg of torn but tight-fitting slacks. Beneath these, and obviously serving as a bandage, was a long strip of filthy material completely encircling the upper calf.

Slowly, and in obvious pain, she began to unwind it.

Duncan, unconsciously craning forward, saw the makeshift bandage fall to one side revealing an ugly wound which was obviously infected. The surrounding flesh was badly inflamed and the whole calf unnaturally swollen.

"It looks like a stab wound."

"She probably slipped and caught it on one of the stalagmites," said the technician. "Some of them are sharper than needles."

Duncan nodded, barely hearing. "That wound is septic, in a few hours she'll be running a fever." He frowned thoughtfully. "Is it possible to magnify the face, please?"

"Anything to oblige, sir." The technician made swift adjustments and the face seemed to rush forward and loom above them.

Even without the dirt the face would have been far from prepossessing.

The flat Asiatic features were sallow-skinned, loosely fleshed, high cheek-boned and oddly angled. The eyes were protuberant and staring.

The mouth loose and inclined to drool.

Duncan straightened slowly as if deep in thought.

"Do you know anything about glandular disorders, Mayor Sebastian?"

"Not enough to make a diagnosis. Is it important?"

"I think so. Is there a doctor anywhere who could take a look at this picture?"

"We could hook one in but I'd like to know why."

"Never mind, call the doctor in later. That woman, apart from her general filth, is such a glandular mess I don't think she could have got that way naturally. Secondly, and more important, in seventy-two hours she'll be dead from septicemia." He paused and faced the other directly. "I'd like to beg a first aid kit and your permission to go out and try and bring her in."

The mayor looked at him strangely. "My dear chap, the first aid kit is yours. As to the rest, this is a free community and if you wish to risk your life on such a doubtful errand of mercy that is your business. I must point out, however, that you are on your own. I cannot risk the safety of the entire community just for you. Secondly, you will do well to observe that the woman is armed. The butt of some sort of weapon is tucked into the waist belt. Please bear in mind that the woman appears deranged and is, to all intents and purposes, a hunted animal. Alas, important as you are, I have no authority to restrain you which, I must admit, I regret." He paused, frowned, then suddenly held out his hand. "Best of luck. I think you're a damned idiot but I know it won't deter you."

Krazy Kate rewound the bandage fumblingly about the swollen calf and stood up, wincing. A hot and tiny hammer beat inside her leg but she was beginning to accept it as part of her everyday misery. She limped on, but not once did she forget her natural caution. Bitter experience had taught her to hug every available scrap of cover and, where necessary, crawl on her belly across open spaces. Always there was the danger of the men--the men in black uniforms--who came riding over the rubble on shining silver rafts. Men whose weapons spat long threads of purple fire, gouging great holes in the ground in bright puffs of vapor.

She shook her head slowly and limped on. Not far away was a hole in which she could rest until she felt better.

She rounded the curve of a ruined wall and stopped as if frozen.

Right in front of her and seated on a pile of half-fused slag was a man. A fair-haired man in a light tunic with his hands resting open and empty on his knees.

The man was so still that she wondered for the moment if he were a statue like the one she had found to the north with half its head melted away. Then she saw the rising and falling of the chest and her hand began to slide very slowly up her right thigh towards the gun. Perhaps, if she kept quite still, but moved her hand very, very slowly, she could draw the gun and kill the man.

"Do not be afraid." The man said the words very slowly as if he understood that she was slow to understand. Then he smiled and repeated them once more.

Dully she was aware that her creeping hand was becoming hesitant and that the muscles in her arm were trembling. The man did not wear a black uniform and he had smiled.

"I will not hurt you." Very slowly he lifted his hands from his knees and held them out, palms upward. "I will not hurt you. You see, my hands are empty. I have no gun."

No gun? She tried to think. If he had no gun then he would be easy to kill. No need to--but he had smiled--

"You are not afraid of me." The man's voice was still gentle but had become strangely compelling.

Not afraid? Briefly and inconsequently she thought how kind the man

was to speak so slowly and then her fingers touched the butt of the gun.

He said, very gently but in the same compelling voice, "Your leg hurts--I can make it well--you would like me to make it well."

She heard herself say, "Yes," her voice sounding thick, muffled and far away. It was so long since she had spoken. Often she muttered to herself but to speak--She was touching the gun and she wondered in a muddled way why she had not drawn it and killed the man.

"Don't be afraid, little girl. Don't be afraid." He came forward and knelt down beside her.

Little girl--little girl? It seemed to mean something kind and far away which she couldn't quite remember. Somehow it made her feel infinitely sad and she felt her eyes fill with tears.

Little girl? Fearfully she stretched out a hand, ready to jerk back at the slightest movement, and touched the man's shoulder.

"There, there," he said. He had unwound the bandage and was skillfully dusting the wound. Infection had gone too far for the powder to be wholly effective but it would delay its progress and take away the pain.

Krazy Kate felt the tears running down her face and could not explain even to herself why she wept. The man seemed to mean something forgotten, sad, but wholly necessary. The warmth of his shoulder beneath her hand represented not only kindness but, in some strange way, security.

She must tell the man. She must make it clear...

She knew what she wanted to say but speech was almost a forgotten

thing.

"Not--not--" Her throat jerked and her face twitched and twisted in spastic agonies. "Not--not go, please." She stopped, panting, almost exhausted by the effort of speaking, and her fingers dug into the man's shoulder. "Not go." She had to make him understand that he must not leave her. "No, no, no."

He rose slowly and took her hand. "Come." He pulled gently and slowly she understood.

"Yes--come." She clung desperately to his hand but followed him without question.

"It's all over," he said softly. "You will soon be safe."

It was then she jerked away her hand and pulled the gun.

It did not take the Administration long to discover that their major cities were crawling with armed micro-robotics which would take years to find and destroy but their reactions were swift. In exactly eighteen hours they had proofed an entire suite against micro-robotic invasion. Beyond was an anteroom where those entering or leaving were subjected to the scrutiny of high powered scanning devices. By the time the experts had finished a non-filterable virus would have stood a very poor chance of escaping detection.

In this stronghold the Administration conferred with the experts who were not slow in determining the location of the opposition. It was obvious, therefore, that the first point of consideration must be the garrison. Here, all too clearly, was a ready-to-use salient through which, if held, their main forces could be poured when the attack came.

They realized however, the need for subtlety, or the D.A. people

would pinch out this salient before it could be used. Extension or massive reinforcement was, therefore, out of the question, but it was not long before the experts came up with a solution—quality reinforcement.

The idea was simple enough. Pull out Private Smith (Class O/I, non-technical) and replace with Private Jones (Sci/ tech/Elec-sol-chem 1st Class/combat).

The same applied to equipment. Pull out the obsolete Mark III energy rifle and replace with the newest and latest Mark IX. There was no difference in appearance but the Mark IX had three times the range and could punch a four foot hole right through a thirty story tenement. A very handy instrument indeed, if that same tenement happened to be directly below you.

The plans for quality reinforcement had yet to be dispatched to the Garrison Commander. And Corporal Rune of Outpost 23 had no idea that plans for his swift return to civilization were already on their way.

Corporal Rune was bored, frustrated, resentful of this spell of duty and inherently vicious.

These outposts strung at intervals across this desert of unending ruin seemed at the moment pointless. His own spell of duty was, he felt, a deliberate punishment for some obscure and unmentioned offense.

It was true that they were warm and reasonably comfortable. It was also true that this job had once held much more than boredom. But now...

Irritably he turned towards the entertainment screen then decided against it. He was sick of the tapes. He knew them by heart, and

even the pornographic ones served only to increase his frustration. He wanted the real thing. Not a lot of little three-dimensionals mimicking human perversions on an entertainment screen.

Eight or ten years ago, he remembered, things had been different out here. The nomads--he always referred to them mentally as Arabs--had been more numerous and less wily. One could go hunting, have some real sport and, if one were not too particular about bodily hygiene, rape one or two personable, if slightly deranged, young women.

Those days were gone. The Arabs had been halved and those who remained were wily and often armed. Not only had they learned to move close or among the larger ruins where search instruments were less effective but they seemed to have developed a sixth sense for floaters or the approaching hunter.

No, things were definitely not what they used to be. He remembered that professor chap, for instance, who had really been a good one. What had the fellow called himself? Ah, yes, a lecturer on social sciences. He had been filthy, bearded and slightly insane but it might have been true.

"My dear fellow, why should you kill me? My death is not even an economic solution. My demise cannot benefit the culture which supports you. I am not its prisoner. It is not called upon to feed me or worry itself as to my well-being. Why then, does it employ you to dispose of me? Your psyche alone will be coarsened by cold-blooded murder and I am confident you will not be reimbursed for this ill-considered act. On the other hand, surely the regime has not deteriorated to such an extent that it requires the assurance of scalps in its plastic wigwams."

Rune had listened until he had grown bored then he had raised the

punch gun, set the dial at low and knocked the man off the low wall where he had been sitting.

"That, my friend, is the act of an unregenerate savage."

Corporal Rune had knocked the man down again. He had knocked him down seven times before it finally sunk into the other's mind that this was more than a sadistic game. This was a very big cat with a very small mouse and there was no escape.

"Men like you drag even the civilized down to your own level." He had picked up a jagged length of fused plastic and tried to hurl it like a spear.

Rune had flicked the adjustment to full power and fired for the last time.

The professor of social sciences had dropped the makeshift spear, opened his mouth and exhaled blood. Most of his chest was caved in and he had fallen sideways without a sound...

Rune shook himself irritably. These days nothing happened and, even if it did, one had to be careful.

Wearily he turned on the search-field, expecting it blank as usual, and was surprised to find an indicative pink spot at extreme range of detection.

He swore. The damned Arab would be gone before he got there. He frowned, undecided. It was worth a try and in any case it would pass the time. Yes, why not?

He plugged in the personal search unit, locked on the bearing and thrust the instrument into his pocket.

It was the work of seconds to pull out the floater and it rose swiftly as soon as he touched the release.

He took a quick glance at the search unit. Hell, two spots now, if only these damn floaters were faster. Nonetheless he held it at a moderate speed and close to the ground. He, too, had learned to hug every scrap of cover.

The floater was nothing so much as a thrust-driven gravity raft on which one lay full length. A transparent cover could be pulled over the prone operator but, at the moment, he scorned it. The damn thing took time to remove and the essence of this business was speed.

A hundred yards from the indicated spot he locked the floater a foot from the ground and approached on foot. The Arabs were behind a huge mound of slag and if he worked round to the right--yes--yes--ah!

He raised the gun and froze. He knew that face.

Too late he realized that the other Arab, a woman, had seen him and he panicked, trying to run back for cover and fire at the same time.

The woman's weapon made a booming noise and ejected what looked like a white mist.

Rune never had a chance to scream. The hail of microscopic fragments, driven down a line-of-force, had sufficient velocity to penetrate clothing and skin. There, they combined with the body chemistry and instantly ignited.

Corporal Rune became his own funeral pyre, a pillar of flame which flapped its flaring arms, tottered a few paces and finally collapsed in a smoking heap.

"Oh, God." Slowly the woman put her hands over her eyes. Dimly she

seemed to remember that she had always hated death and violence.

Chapter Fifteen

GAYNOR WAS QUITE unaware of the drama taking place on the surface. He had just finished his final session with the psychs and was watching uneasily as a bright shoulder flash was attached to his tunic and an exact copy stamped indelibly on his wrist.

"I'll leave you to chew it over." The psych smiled. "You're a newcomer so you may not like what you see. There's a perfecto-mirror in the corner. It will save you standing on your head to see your war paint. By the way, one of our lads will be in later to give you a briefing on general economy and social conduct." He withdrew and the door slid shut behind him.

Gaynor scowled at the closed door and approached the mirror with some hesitation. He had the uncomfortable conviction that he was going to get a close look at his own soul and he was not altogether sure he was going to enjoy the experience.

He didn't, but he found compensations. His integrity and personal honesty symbols were of a high standard and his creative ability potentials something to be proud of. Loyalty was also a clear symbol which went well with marked physical and moral courage, but hell--Gaynor felt himself coloring uncomfortably--despite clearly defined principles which, no doubt, served as a restraint, boldly defined symbols of sensuality placed him firmly in the category of a roue.

He glared at his reflection in the mirror. There was a mistake, no doubt about that. He'd have to have a word...

It occurred to him suddenly that he'd never had a chance to find out.

Most of his time had been spent in the armed forces and he'd had

his hands pretty full since his return. On the other hand, there had been three or four "incidents" and a lot of his thoughts... Perhaps he'd better forget about having that word.

He looked at the rest of the symbols. They labeled him as stubborn to the point of pig-headedness and there was a strong coupling link of aggression.

"Don't look so perturbed." The psych had entered unnoticed. "Actually you're quite likeable and, in any case, you'll find it all extraordinarily helpful in measuring yourself against given circumstances." He motioned the other to a convenient chair. "Let's get down to business, shall we?" He smiled. "My name's Relling, by the way, I'm your guide and mentor for the next few hours." He tossed over some papers.

"I have offers here from three publishing houses. They're familiar with your work and offer you your own column. You can take your pick. There's very little difference in the rates. Needless to say there is no censorship here but there are libel laws and one can be sued for deliberate slander."

"They're offering me a job? They have only the politically slanted columns to go on."

"Don't delude yourself. Your closeness to Duncan brought you under almost constant surveillance. That secret write up on the Vrenka was considered top-rate reporting."

"You haven't missed much, have you? I'm beginning to be half glad I've lived a pure life recently."

Relling laughed. "I applaud the "half." As your flash tells me, you are an honest man." He rose before Gaynor became embarrassed.

"Let's go and look at the city. You must learn economic conduct and the best way to teach is by demonstration."

He touched a button and a small black object was ejected from a wall slot.

"Here we are, tuned and ready." He held up something dangling from a long thin chain. "This is your economic key, most people wear them round the neck. You will find the chain stretches sufficiently for normal use. Put it on."

Gaynor obeyed self-consciously.

"Excellent." Relling rubbed his hands as if he had accomplished something important. "Now let's go out and spend some money."

"What money?" Perplexity made Gaynor sound aggressive.

"Mine for demonstrable purposes. You have only basic, a hundred units a week, which is not enough to go rash on. Of course, as soon as you decide on this job, you will get a salary plus basic."

Gaynor thought of something. "One thing, I like the idea of this job but I'm well aware trouble is brewing. Have you any kind of military organization to which I could be called in the event of a crisis?"

"Ah, we were hoping for that. I'll tell you how to get in touch with the Reserves on our return. Your combat experience will be more than useful."

He moved towards the door. "Now let's take a stroll down Regent Street."

Gaynor said, "Pardon?"

"Just our main tunnel, we borrowed a lot of names from the surface."

The first look at what Relling called the main tunnel left Gaynor considerably shaken. Despite heavy traffic passing over their heads, the tunnel roof was so cleverly contrived to represent the sky that the procession of vehicles looked like air traffic. Skillful murals and imaginative lighting gave the wide tunnel a convincing appearance of a wide airy street flanked by tall and graceful buildings.

"Seventeen miles of this," said Relling conversationally. "This is the heart, or more aptly, the main artery of our underground city."

Gaynor shook his head slowly, unable to comment. There were shops, cafes, places of entertainment and even the familiar moving ways.

"Don't be overawed, old chap. Remember, a great deal of this was already in being long before the war." He laughed. "Like all cities it has its defects. As physical culture is a must in this kind of existence every other damn door leads either to a gymnasium or a swimming pool. We are probably the most aquatic, the toughest and over-exercised people in all history."

He paused and made a gesture at a doorway. "Let's eat."

Gaynor glanced upwards. The sign over the door said Cosmopolitan Cafe. He put the name down to nostalgia or wishful thinking but the interior took him by surprise.

The whole cafe was designed to represent an old-world garden and there was even a small pond complete with rushes and a number of moving and wholly life-like ducks.

"Our roboticists are good." Rolling seemed to be reading his mind.

"Particularly the men who made those. The only ducks they had ever seen were on a historical tape. Take a seat."

Gaynor sat down, a little dazed, close to a wall cleverly contrived to resemble part of an ancient farmhouse and suitably covered with rambler roses.

"This is where we begin." Relling pointed to a small box-like device attached to the far side of the table. "Most of this will be more or less familiar. Pick up the printed menu. Select your dish. Note the number of your selection and dial it. Simple enough. The meal will come up through the delivery chute in the center of the table." Relling paused and beckoned him closer. "Now we come to the tricky part. Having selected our meal, the device expects us to pay for it and will not serve the meal until we do.

Now on top of this box you will note the following: a calibrated dial with a double set of figures, a small slot for an economic key and three blank dials. The first blank dial is marked standard charges. That will show the cost of the meal. The second is marked balance which is obvious and the third, adjusted balance, will be made plain when I pay for the meal. Now watch." He leaned forward and inserted his economic key into the small slot and immediately the three dials lit. The dial marked standard charge showed 4.07 and the second dial marked balance showed 6y-282d-19.08.

Relling smiled. "Yes it looks confusing but really it is quite simple. Our economic system is based on a time/work unit system. The cost of the meal is 4.07 while my credit balance at the bank is 6 years, 282 days and 19.08 hours-follow? I then set the pointers on this calibrated dial to the cost of the meal, or the figures under standard charge, which gives the bank authority to deduct that amount from my credit balance as you will see. Look."

Gaynor saw the dial marked adjusted balance suddenly display the figures; 6y-282d-15.01.

"Simple isn't it?" Relling withdrew his key. "Now let's sit down and enjoy this meal while it's hot. You can ask questions as we eat."

Gaynor had so many questions that he never remembered the contents of the meal.

"What's to stop me from using your key?"

"Each key is exactly tuned to the personality of the owner. Use mine and your order will not only be rejected but the device will call the police."

"I could hold a gun to your head while you used it."

Relling grinned. "All these mechanisms incorporate an hysteria index of acute sensitivity. You'd still get a rejection and the police. Sorry, Gaynor, we have all the answers. You can't beat this thing. All these devices are hooked to the robotic bank which retains and records the entire credit of every individual in the community. You go to work and clock in, and immediately the robotic bank begins ticking in your credit until such a time as you clock out. While working, you are adding to your abstract credit balance which can never be lost or stolen."

Relling pushed aside his empty plate. "You'll find work rates only mildly confusing. For instance, the publishing houses offer you a reporting job at rates of six to one or more aptly six hours pay for one hour's work, which, if not riches, brings near-affluence."

"May I borrow or loan credit under this system?"

"Oh yes, there are transaction devices in the financial houses, but the

robotic bank keeps a tight check on one's ability to repay and a deduction/repayment rate has to be fixed beforehand."

Gaynor laughed. "I had no intention of borrowing but I'd like to try this thing. How much are cigarettes?"

"A fifty packet, top standard, will cost you exactly one hour."

"I should have enough on basic." Gaynor rose, fumbled for his key and inserted it in the slot. "Hell, I forgot to dial." He began again and reinserted the key.

The dials lit. Standard charge said 1.00 and balance 14.02.

Gaynor remembered to use the pointers of the calibrated dial and his adjusted balance appeared almost immediately. When he withdrew the key the cigarettes were already on the table.

"Congratulations. You picked that up quickly. Candidly I think we should have a beer to celebrate."

"Thanks, but that's damned expensive isn't it?"

"Ten days a glass but to hell with it. It's not every day I instruct an outsider."

"Wait until I'm working and I'll return the compliment."

"Oh, for God's sake man, you don't see any miser symbols on my flash, do you?"

Gaynor sipped the beer and looked about him. The cafe was slowly filling and something about the people reminded him of his early childhood. They spoke in normal voices, they behaved naturally and they often laughed. The contrast between these casual, if noisy

people, and the cowed rank and file of the Administration was overwhelming.

His attention was suddenly attracted by a girl at a nearby table and he found himself unable to look elsewhere. Like everyone else in the community she wore the familiar shorts and tunic but there was something about the way her blue-black hair caught the light, and the curve of her...

Gaynor remembered his revealing shoulder flash and felt the back of his neck turn hot.

"You like Estelle?" Relling's eyes were amused. "You know her?"

"She's in my area. It's my business to know her." He waited as if expecting some comment and Gaynor suddenly remembered that the girl, too, must have a shoulder flash. He looked and said, "Good God."

Relling smiled. "What am I supposed to conclude from that exclamation?"

Gaynor frowned slightly, "I don't quite know. It took me by surprise. Is this sort of thing permitted?"

"Permitted? This is a free community. Estelle chooses her own life."

"Yes, yes. I appreciate that. It was seeing it on her shoulder flash which shook me. Hell, it's almost advertising."

Relling looked at him intently, then smiled. "I forget you come from another community where women are coerced into that kind of life. I forget your society does not, like us, recognize both love and lust and allow for both. The Administration, I must remind myself, recognizes only the latter."

"Now look-"

"Allow me to continue, please. This is a very necessary part of your education." He paused and sucked alight a cigarette. "Let's carry this thing a little further. Estelle's glandular balance is such that only the promiscuous We is physically and emotionally satisfying for her. She recognizes these tendencies in herself and has, accordingly, placed herself at the service of the community. In our books she is a necessary, useful, and highly respected member of our society. As you are beginning to see, the basis of our free society is the old adage of 'Know thyself and act accordingly.' "

Gaynor scowled at him. Intellectually he agreed with Relling and his theories up to the hilt, but something inside him made him want to dispute the point angrily.

"Got everything taped, haven't you? Everything's pat, pigeon-holed and precisely arranged to fit the theory."

Strangely Relling looked pleased. "Excellent. Now let's get you taped."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm your psych, remember? Your argument is not with me, or the theory. It's with Estelle."

"What the hell do you mean? I don't know her."

"True, but this is one of those rare occasions when a man is attracted to a woman emotionally and physically at first sight. The realization that she is what she is has upset your emotional balance so you have to fight about it. Look at it this way, under the old system you could have fallen in love with her. She could have deceived you

and the net result could have been violence or even murder. This way, our way, there can be no deceit and, if you have an affair, at least your eyes are open to the truth."

Gaynor glared at him, then slowly relaxed. "Well, you're right about me but I'm not sure I like the truth." He grinned ruefully. "You made me feel adolescent and sort of naked."

"Fine, that was the idea and that was the lesson you had to learn." He exhaled smoke and smiled. "Calmed down enough to meet her yet? If you read her flash thoroughly, you will have noticed she is, like yourself, creative. Estelle is an accomplished sculptress."

Gaynor did not answer at once. "Does--I suppose--I mean do people ever change, change enough to have their flashes altered?"

"It happens quite often, anyone can apply for reassessment." Relling ground out his cigarette and looked at the other directly. "Don't count on anything, Gaynor. You could get really hurt that way. Why not accept Estelle as she is? You'll find it a much happier and much safer way to live."

He rose. "Face it now. I'll fetch her..."

She was tall, he saw, tall and slender and she moved with a grace that made his throat tighten uncomfortably. She'd no right to be--no damn right at all and he thought suddenly, startlingly and with unshakeable conviction which seemed to have no relation to his usual thinking processes:

"She's mine. There's nothing Relling can do about it. Nothing her damn glands can do about it. Soon she'll know too."

When Relling introduced them Gaynor was outwardly calm and inwardly assured.

"Please sit down. I hear you're a sculptress."

She smiled. "How flattering. Are you really interested?"

"Of course, I'd like to see some of your work."

She said gently but with a faint smile. "Before or after?"

"That remains to be seen." He was still inwardly calm. "Unfortunately, as Mr. Relling explained, until I take up a contract I'm financially embarrassed."

She glanced at his shoulder flash. "You look trustworthy enough to my eyes."

"Thank you." He liked her eyes. They were large, dark, strangely warm and expressive. "Do you live far away?"

"No, quite close. We could walk if you wish. Would you like to walk?"

"Very much." He rose. "I'll just--" but Relling had disappeared. "Well, that settles that. Shall we go?"

"This way." She took his arm then looked at him quickly. "Do I frighten you. You're very tense."

"I'm not frightened. Call it disturbed. I've never met anyone quite like you."

"Are there no girls outside--my kind of girl?"

"Your kind perhaps. But not like you. You're individual."

She laughed softly. "You're different too. Only I can't put it into words."

"You will."

"You sound very confident. Do you always speak to your hired women as if you were courting them? Or is that a new line from the outside?"

He laughed, curiously sure of himself. "The answer to both your questions is no--only to you."

She looked at him quickly and uncertainly. "If I hadn't taken a good look at your shoulder flash I would wonder if you were a nut case. Up these stairs."

He touched her hand as the door slid shut behind them and she shivered.

"Who's tense now?"

She shook her head, frowning. "You're different. You make me feel sort of--strange."

"Let's find out how strange." He drew her close.

She clung to him for a few seconds then wrenched away. "This is some sort of trick. What are you trying to do to me?"

"Make you know as I know."

"You're mad--don't you know what I am?"

"I know what you were." He pulled her to him and kissed her mouth.

For a few seconds she struggled then began to cling to him fiercely.

Slowly he released her. "Now you know."

She looked up at him dazedly. "Yes--yes, I know. But I've changed somehow. What have you done to me, what is it inside me making me know...."

Chapter Sixteen

THE DOCTOR LOOKED down at the inert figure on the bed. "I agree with you, Mr. Duncan, a glandular chaos like this could not occur naturally." He pulled back the woman's eyelid. "To me it looks like deliberate manipulation to bring about a personality change and inhibit the intelligence." He made a few brief tests. "Over-active thyroid. Some sort of jiggery-pokery with the pituitary--horribly botched job. I wonder why they did it."

"Perhaps because she was a hypno-resistant but, as you say, it was a botched job."

"As far as I'm aware the Administration only tried that once and then--Good God, you don't think this wreck is Martha Deering, do you?"

"It could be."

"You took a hell of a chance finding out. In her state she could have blown your head off."

"She very nearly did." Duncan smiled faintly. "However, I considered the whole business worth the risk. We know Martha Deering was manipulated. We know she escaped before the manipulation took full effect. Can you do anything for her?"

"I think I can do a sounder job of restoration than they did from the demolition angle but I'll make promises only after the first tests."

Duncan left the clinic, entered a call box, and dialed a private number.

The Mayor's face appeared in the screen. "Hello, Duncan, what can I

do for you?"

"I called up to apologize. I'm afraid our tour of inspection was rudely interrupted."

"Think nothing of it, but tell me, are you prone to quixotic gestures?"

"It was not exactly quixotic. I had reasons for supposing, now partly confirmed, that Krazy Kate was in reality Martha Deering, the radiologist."

Sebastian looked thoughtful, then smiled. "Good luck, anyway." He broke contact.

Duncan left the call box frowning. Good luck? What exactly had Sebastian meant by that. Surely he did not suspect-- On the other hand to a man of the mayor's sagacity the whole business might be blatantly obvious.

His mind went back four years to a day on Mattrain. He'd been tapping Earth's communication bands which was part of his daily education and had locked in on an instructional beam. A woman scientist had been lecturing student groups on radiology. Duncan found himself listening to her voice rather than to her words and suddenly knowing--God, it was different now, now that he was here.

Duncan sighed inwardly. Already the signs were showing but he must wait and see. His own position was so difficult. Nonetheless, any day now, people would start asking questions. Ask Duncan, Duncan will know.

Duncan will explain. Yes, yes, Duncan, the superman, whose business it would be to explain the faculties and functions of sex as the ancient frictions gave way to the true realizations.

Yes, it was true he had the answers but it was text book knowledge, second-hand information from his alien instructors, observation and demonstrable example on Mattrain itself.

God, he was like an elderly maiden aunt giving advice to the lovelorn with the same lack of experience. He who had never touched a woman's body, let alone slept with a woman in his arms.

Duncan sighed again and walked slowly back to his room ignoring the moving ways. It seemed that all his life he had stood alone, a man of two worlds who was at home on neither.

On Mattrain he had been the intelligent ape for whom allowances must be made, lessons simplified and mechanisms adjusted downwards to the level of his limited intelligence. Not once, of course, by word or gesture, had his instructors or foster parents referred to his mental state. Everyone had been unfailingly loving, gentle and considerate, but even so comparisons had been unavoidable. Mattrain youngsters, half his age, had been mentally computing dimensional equations--a subject he had never grasped--as part of their normal education, while he fumbled blindly with spatial mathematics. The same youngsters controlled the mechanisms of their civilization by force of mind whereas he, the bright ape, must have those same mechanisms adapted--the button, the switch, the visible dial.

Then, suddenly, the change in role from the retarded outcast to the superman with no real crutch for help. Despite all his advantages he still had to act, he still had to convey superiority which, in view of his past, had been a full time job. The race had accepted him as homo superior, but several times he had nearly failed. He had underestimated the opposition on his run to the D.A. and he had never considered that a man like Paul Sebastian could develop in this chaos. Not that Sebastian was a danger.

On the contrary, he was a life-line. But he should have been prepared for the grand exception.

Only a genius or a superman--and Sebastian was both-- could have maintained such absolute power without being corrupted by it. True, the mayor was a dictator but paradoxically he enforced freedom. The shoulder flash, the free expression of human personality had been his idea and he defended that freedom with ruthlessness which would have put Kaft to shame. His method was simple--he controlled the sources of power. Power ran this community. Without power there was no food, no air, no production and no economy. Built into Sebastian's body was a micro-mechanism into which all sources of power were linked. This same mechanism included a psychological register and an hysteria index. If Sebastian died suddenly and by violence, a fuse would blow and all power would cease immediately. If on the other hand, he were taken seriously ill, power failure would be slow. The Medics would have time to remove the mechanism and transfer it to one of those trained and educated to take his place. Nothing had been left to chance. However, the mechanism was equipped with a poison register. Sebastian had made sure that if he were protected from the people, the people were protected against him. The hysteria index watched his mental state and would render him unconscious if he became insane or developed psychological sickness.

Duncan reached his room and the door slid shut behind him as he entered. The change, he thought, is really beginning now but what the hell will Sebastian be like when-- There was another side to the coin however, an unpleasant side and that would come too. This kind of pruning was not going to be happy even if the dead branches did obligingly chop themselves from the tree.

The old-fashioned caller purred suddenly and he touched a switch,

forgetting his rather morbid thoughts.

"Mr. Duncan?"

"Yes, speaking."

"Ah, fine. Guild of Adventurers here. We got your boy. Thought you'd like to know."

"Boy?" Duncan clicked the visual switch. "I don't quite follow, I'm afraid."

The dark-skinned man in the vision screen removed a pipe from his mouth and smiled. "Hengist, of course. The job was put on our agenda some days ago and we thought it tricky enough to be interesting. We pulled him out right under their noses posing as security boys from another sector."

"Thank you, but how on earth did you do it?"

"Simple enough really. We have our own flyer which we built ourselves.

One of our lads cooked up a rather unique anti-detection unit which the opposition doesn't know about yet." The caller grinned. "Hengist's war record made it worth the trip and now the psychs have deprogramed him.

He seems a good bloke. Sardonic humor, dog-like gratitude despite that, and bags of guts considering what he's been through. Oh, yes, just one other thing. Having studied his file, we pulled his girl out as well which was perhaps fortunate. As soon as the psychs cleared him he wanted to go back for her. The psychs would like you to call them on that point. They fear it might be some obscure kind of fixation. You see, Mr. Duncan, Hengist insists he has developed a

built-in faculty for recognizing his better half and that she's it."

Duncan smiled faintly. "I'll ask you a question. Have you been feeling extraordinarily clear-headed lately?"

"Yes--yes, I have. Disturbingly clear-headed."

"You are quite normal. So is Hengist. The same fixation may hit you or even one of the psychs any day now."

"It's bad, very bad." Statten looked near to panic. "The hysteria level is so high the whole world could explode into insurrection right now."

"Is that all you're worrying about?" Dowd looked as if he could hit him.

"I don't need a board of psychs to tell me that. All I have to do is look out of the window." He picked up a report and shook it angrily. "Sixteen officers in the coming assault have vanished without trace. A brigadier has been shot by persons unknown while crossing the parade ground. We can't find Frond. We can't find Langerman. Sixteen experts have been caught trying to slip out of the city and that's only a small part of the hundred and eight who appear to have succeeded. On the top of that we have thirty cases of industrial and military sabotage on our hands." He glowered at the Supreme Director's empty chair. "Today, of all days, Kaft has to be late."

"We're fifteen minutes early," said Rickman in a reasonable voice.

"Is that so?" Dowd was obviously looking for a quarrel. "Under the circumstances he should have been early, too." He looked at the politician suspiciously. "Too many people are taking this business very casually indeed. I, personally, have been unable to find the time for rejuvos or hair-plant but maybe this business doesn't worry you particularly."

"What are you talking about?" Rickman sounded more puzzled than aggressive.

"Don't play it up, Rickman, your genius for emphasizing your natural stupidity is no longer funny. You were gray at the temples, and you had jewels. You don't get firm flesh without a rejuvo and your hair doesn't change color without a dye or plant."

Rickman was no longer full of bluster or overemphasis. He was becoming used to clear analytical thinking but he was careful not to betray the fact.

"You've got to do something when you can't sleep, haven't you. If you can get a good night's rest with all this worry on your shoulders you're a better man than most, Dowd."

The industrialist scowled at him. The explanation was not only sensible but wholly in keeping with Rickman's character and yet Dowd tried to put his finger on something which he sensed was there. He had no idea what it was yet. In some strange way, Rickman was different. Dowd wished he could decide in what way.

Inwardly Rickman was hoping that the tension inside him didn't show.

Firm flesh, dark at the temples--what the devil was Dowd talking about?

Yet he had the uncomfortable feeling that Dowd might be right. Although he had not bothered to study himself in the mirror recently he had been conscious of an increasing vitality and a greater strength in his muscles.

Casually he leaned forward so that he could see his reflection in the bright surface of the conference table and felt his scalp prickle with

sweat.

It was impossible to see his color but his face was noticeably thinner and the hair at his temples completely black.

"Kaft is taking this thing too damn casually." Dowd was striding nervously up and down and he passed the politician leaving a faint smell of decay.

Rickman tried to breathe it away and fought down an inclination to retch. It occurred to him suddenly that the smell seemed peculiar to certain people but not to others. But why? He wished he could find an answer. He had given up blaming his own nose.

He took another furtive look at his reflection. Damn it, he did look younger. Not only had the gray disappeared from his temples but his hair looked thicker, wavy and almost blue-black. He had a sudden memory of himself laughing, broad shouldered, slim waisted with an artificial rose on the lapel of his coat and Gelda clinging to his arm.

The memory made him uncomfortable. That had been a long time ago in the early days of the war when a respectable background was considered essential for a rising politician.

Rickman fought a brief and losing battle with an increasing sense of guilt. Hell, he hadn't much to be proud of, had he? It was strange really that he had never divorced Gelda. But there had been so many pressures and, if he were frank with himself, marriage had been a form of protection against all the women who had passed through his private suite.

He wondered what Gelda looked like now. Must be ten years since--

Why had he seen her then? She had still been decorative. Probably

some sort of public function.

He had never quite understood how they had ceased to-- Yes, he did, be honest. Too many others, too much work away from home and a mistress in hand was preferable to-- Looking back began to make him feel a little sick inside. So many damn women and he couldn't remember a quarter of them. At least he'd been fond of Gelda once, but the rest had been a procession of bodies. What had Gelda got out of the bargain? The answer was damned everything. Yet the hideously ornate home and the benefits of a first-class citizen didn't seem to rate anymore.

He realized that Kaft had arrived and was lowering himself into his chair. The Supreme Director looked gaunt and there was a suggestion of unhealthy sallowness beneath the pink senile skin.

He looked about him. "I have read the reports, gentlemen. Kindly refrain from repeating them." He leaned back, outwardly calm. "It is suspected that some sort of psychological projector is being used from the D.A. which is affecting the minds of the rank and file. Operation Nutcracker will therefore be brought forward by several weeks and the counter measures to the present near-insurgence will be launched within seventeen days instead of twenty-five."

"It's Duncan," said Dowd, savagely. "When he escaped, public opinion jumped in his favor and a lot of people look upon him now as some sort of savior."

"Or the lesser of two evils," said Kaft, softly. "If we are to survive we must remain realists."

"We should have pulled out of the city and plastered the enemy with solar bombs." Statten's mouth was so tight that his nose threatened to meet his chin.

Kaft looked at him with distaste. "And how long do you think we'd survive with several million dead, thirty cities out of commission and our industrial strength halved? Our economy would fold up overnight and the subsequent riots would overwhelm us."

"But, good God, to let the enemy dictate strategy is military suicide."

"As they play it, perhaps, but they are dealing from the pack. We deal from our sleeves."

Statten said: "Sleeves, hell--look at history. Once a people get the stink of defeat in their nostrils they'll use any weapon to break out. If we start beating hell out of them with conventional weapons they'll smear our cities anyway."

Kaft sighed. "Our attack has certain aspects which, if successful, should prevent this." He pushed across a sheet of paper. "This is a rough outline of the proposed assault."

Statten picked it up and studied it frowning. He took a long time to read it and when he laid it down he was still grim. "I grant top marks for Operation Cardiac. If we pull it off we've won. But throwing in our entire security forces is a hell of a risk. Every damn sector will start its own insurrection as soon as we pull them out." "True, but if we win we can crush them one at a time."

Further, with these D.A. people defeated, there will be no rallying point, no Duncan and no psychological interference. Once we get Sector U.S.

under our "heels again the rest of the planet will toe the line soon enough."

"Why only security forces?" Dowd was still glowering and

aggressive.

"Because at the moment the armed forces cannot be trusted."

"We could still lose." Dowd sounded pessimistic.

"Again true, but we need no reminder that we are realists. One day before the attack we shall withdraw from this city to our original headquarters beneath the Andes. This stronghold is stocked and self-supporting. Key personnel and a picked defense force are already there and there is more than enough room for us and our entire staffs." He paused and looked directly at Statten. "All solar energy devices were transferred to the stronghold on my orders over two months ago. You see, General, there is a lot to be said for a card up the sleeve."

Chapter Seventeen

"I KNOW YOU'LL be very happy." Duncan felt more than ever like an elderly maiden aunt.

"Yes, thanks." Gaynor began to pace restlessly up and down Duncan's small room. "You're sure this thing isn't some sort of psychological disorder? I mean, I knew at the time. I know when I'm with her but after a few hours of separation--"

"That's just the point. This particular faculty is reciprocal. You're not meant to be separated for long periods in these early stages."

"I'm afraid I don't follow." Gaynor sounded resigned.

"Very well, I'll try and explain." Duncan sighed inwardly.

"Under the old order in the animal world, and often among men, one had to fight for a mate. This method, it was concluded, was nature's way of ensuring the survival of the strongest and best. The existence of man, one of the weakest of animals, refuted this belief entirely, but that is beside the point at the moment. The old order is now giving way to the new and man finds himself developing a faculty placed there by nature but inhibited until now. This faculty is nature's recognition unit and genetic meter for bringing about the perfection of the species by selective breeding." Duncan paused and smiled apologetically. "Yes, I know that sounds horribly crude but I thought it wiser to get down to basics first.

This faculty, when brought into contact with--or close enough for normal senses--its reflecting complement, immediately responds. In short, both male and female become emotionally and physically responsive to each other and there is a resulting recognition from

this newly developed faculty. Both know, by this, that there is the perfect partner, the exact physical and emotional complement of the other."

"Does this thing last?" Gaynor was still pacing uneasily.

"Well there's no hit and miss, if that's what you mean. There is no possibility of a man or woman ending up with the wrong partner."

"I didn't mean that. Look, you must know what I mean. All this "happy ever after" stuff, how often is it true--one time in ten million? Oh yes, we've a lot of convincing imitations of true love after several years of marriage--a hell of a lot of things look good in public--but we know it's not that way in life. I'll concede the rare exceptions, but the general trend, no. Too often the couple are living either in toleration, resignation or despair, and love is a dead and half-remembered dream."

Duncan nodded understandingly. "Let me assure you that there is no fear of that. Under the precise conditions of the new order man is not fully man nor woman fully woman without the right partner. The two sexes, besides cohabitation, were intended to function as a single unit and the emotion you refer to as love is a constantly deepening and exciting realization of this truth."

Gaynor sucked alight a cigarette and exhaled smoke. "How do you know?"

"Mattrain has exact order; it happens there. The same order is coming about on this planet now--" Duncan realized suddenly he was on dangerous ground and changed the subject quickly before Gaynor asked him for his personal experience. God, it was a fine thing when you knew about a faculty and dare not trust it yourself.

He said, evenly, "Where is Estelle by the way?"

"Gone for reassessment. Do you think she'll get it?"

"I know she'll get it. If she's changed enough to recognize her own faculty, her glandular balance, and with it her way of life, have reverted to the norm. Speaking of glandular balance, I have to run along to the clinic in a few minutes. Care to come?"

Gaynor glanced at his watch. "Be a couple of hours yet at least. Yes, I'll come along."

At the door of the clinic he said, "I suppose you want moral support while you visit Krazy Kate. I saw the news reports next day. Hell, you took a chance."

They reached the private ward and Duncan waved to a chair by the door. "I'd better prepare her. You're the first outside visitor since she was--since she arrived."

Gaynor sat down heavily. He hadn't really wanted to come but it would serve to pass the time. Without Estelle he was full of doubts and emotional jitters. To be brutally frank he'd fallen in love with a woman of a certain type and unless he had the emotional reassurance of her nearness-- He forced his mind away from the subject angrily. Krazy Kate might or might not be Martha Deering, but she was hardly pre-possessing, was she? No doubt, well scrubbed and in clean clothes she was a little less repulsive but even so--

"You can come in now." Duncan was back.

Gaynor rose. He was basically a kind-hearted man and he had a pleasant smile ready on his face as he passed through the door.

It fell off when he got inside and he stood there stupidly and rather

rudely with his mouth open.

The woman in the bed looked at him sympathetically and with understanding. "Oh, Peter, you never warned him--the poor man." She patted the chair by the bed. "Don't be upset. Peter has an over-developed sense of the dramatic. Come and sit down and talk to me."

Dazedly he sat down, wondering if this were some sort of joke. The woman was propped up by a pile of pillows, a mass of wavy chestnut hair fell to her shoulders, her complexion was pale but without blemish, the blue eyes wide, long lashed and full of understanding. He realized he was looking at an intelligent and strikingly attractive woman.

"You are--?" He was unable to finish the sentence.

"Krazy Kate? Yes I was, but as you see I have had expert treatment.

Now I am almost back to normal. Changing conditions helped things along too. It was mean of Peter not to warn you."

He shook his head. "All this in about ten days. It's incredible. Do you remember much of--of what happened?"

"Not a great deal. I remember being picked up, taken to a special clinic and later released or more aptly confined to my own suite. After a few days, I realized I was becoming sluggish and stupid. The single guard was not particularly bright and I managed to get out of the suite and to my flyer while I still had some faculties left." She paused frowning slightly. "I had no idea where I was going. I just kept flying and then, I suppose they cut the power beam. It's all rather vague and far away now. I remember there was a terrific crash. I remember I was in the sea and struggling ashore from the wreck, but after that

everything seems blurred and unreal. It devolved into a sort of horrible half life--part animal, part memory. I must have learned to survive. I must have acquired cunning but I cannot remember how--"

He said, gently, "I'm sorry, I had no wish to open old wounds."

"Please, it isn't like that really. It's like a nightmare, but I can talk about it now. I see it in perspective and I know it's over." She smiled and changed the subject. "You're Peter's first friend I understand."

"Yes, a rather dubious one at first, I'm afraid. It was a question of demonstration before faith." Inwardly he was conscious of a curious sense of readjustment. Hearing Duncan referred to as Peter threw him slightly off balance and there was an underlying familiarity and affection in the woman's voice as if-- Strangely the suggestion made Duncan human.

Despite their friendship there had always been the aura of superiority but now...

He glanced at his watch. "I hope you'll forgive this short visit but I have an appointment."

Duncan grinned. "He has an hour but he just can't sit still." She smiled at him. "I understand. Peter has told me. She would like you to be there waiting, I know."

"Yes, yes, thank you."

Once back, he resumed his restless pacing. Could this business be true despite what Duncan said? A woman of this kind was surely a very different kettle of fish.

When she arrived, however, his doubts vanished as if they had never been. She was his; she belonged to him completely.

"You got it?"

"Of course." She pressed herself against him. "I'm afraid it shook the examining board. They've given me a new flash, not just altered a few symbols."

He said. "Every time we're parted it gets worse."

"Yes." She pressed her mouth to his. "But every time we're together again it gets better..."

Rickman saw the danger signals as soon as they began to appear and was surprised at his own calm. A year ago, no doubt, he would have blundered blithely onto his own execution but now, with a clear mind, the writing on the wall was all too plain.

Perhaps it was because of that same clear mind that an asterisk had been placed against his name. That and other things.

A man couldn't go on taking rejuvos every day. Couldn't go on looking more alert and healthy under daily increasing pressures and long conferences into the early hours, unless...

He knew what Kaft thought, he knew what Dowd and Statten thought!

The sum of their thinking would amount to the same total--he, Rickman, had pulled off a super double-cross. Somehow, in some way, he'd sold out to Duncan and this unnatural vitality was part of the return payment. Kaft would remember that Duncan had once said to him: "How would you like to live a thousand years?"

Rickman could see that such a conclusion was the obvious one because it appeared to be supported by facts. His paunch had vanished. His graying hair had grown dark and visibly thicker. The

veins, once visible in his nose, had disappeared and the muscles of his face- had toned up and grown firmer. Bluntly, in a few short weeks, he appeared to have grown ten years younger.

Rickman slid shut the door of the flyer, touched the servo which ejected cigars and thrust one between his teeth. Despite the now familiar sense of well-being the politician had not spent a good night. It was all very well having a clear mind and strong tendencies to introspection, but he had developed a conscience with it. You couldn't explain away to yourself your failure to visit your wife for ten years. Worse, the threadbare justifications for countless infidelities no longer registered--it had never been her fault but his.

Rickman scowled, puffed smoke through the cigar and started the flyer.

It was not his past which troubled him now but the repercussions of what he intended to do. Whether he got caught or whether he didn't was immaterial--he knew exactly what would happen to Gelda. He had enough on his conscience already and he had no wish to add to the burden. It was hell being able to think, wasn't it? Until a few months ago his entire life had been dictated by fear. You disguised that fear by self-deceit and subjugated your intelligence to that one emotion. Now--oh, yes, you were still afraid, hellish afraid, but you could think without it influencing your judgment.

He lifted the flyer, flicked on the V.I.P. switch and watched the city air controls halt traffic in his favor. No doubt he was being watched but a visit to his wife, although it might bring a derisive comment from Dowd, should not arouse undue suspicion. Thank God it was only a five minute hop.

The roof of the apartment block which Rickman had once called home had cost a fortune in public money. With typical ostentation he

had rejected the normal suite but commandeered the entire roof. Upon the flat airy expanse of plasto-concrete, thirty stories above the street, he had ordered the erection of a hugely ornate Spanish-style bungalow and he had not stopped there. An authorization chit had supplied enough air-trucks, labor and material to turn the rest of the roof into a semi-tropical garden. There was a lawn of real grass, beds of exotic flowers constantly attended by a robotic gardener, and a clear winding stream of real water which emptied itself in a huge swimming pool. There were even groups of slightly drooping but wholly genuine palms.

And he had gone in for elfin figures and jovial plastic rabbits in a big way.

The net result, he realized, as he approached it now, was ornate vulgarity. It was garish, crude and depressing like a play-park without lights or people. Too often, he realized, he had used this monstrosity as balm for his conscience. He had given Gelda the best. She had everything money could buy, a fine home, a-- Just how long could a man get by on soothing cliches like that?

He set the flyer down in the small park--disguised as a corral--and hurried towards the house. The door mechanism recognized him instantly and the artificial wood slid silently to one side as he approached.

Gelda looked up from the studio couch and raised her eyebrows.

"Well," she said. "It's pleasant to see a visitor. Have we been introduced?"

"This is no time for comedy." He was irritated to find himself off guard and acutely embarrassed.

"What did you expect--tragedy, heroics?" Her eyes mocked him. At thirty-eight Gelda Rickman was still a beautiful woman. She had a white, almost translucent complexion, slightly slanting dark eyes and an incongruous but attractive sprinkling of freckles across the bridge of her nose. Her mouth was wide, full, and had once hovered almost continuously on the brink of laughter. She had, he remembered, always reminded him of a fawn. She was small-boned, tiny, slender and, God, she had kept her figure; she was still softly curved.

"This is no time for lust," he thought angrily. He flung the stub of cigar at the disposal slot and missed.

"What do you want?" Her voice was still cool and almost amused.

"No--let me guess, some public function? After ten years I am to be taken from the shelf, dusted, displayed and returned."

He said, thickly, "I had special reasons for coming and I haven't much time." He thrust another cigar between his lips and puffed a cloud of smoke. "You haven't much time either."

"I?" She rose. "Director Rickman, don't push me. If I have a duty to fulfill I will do it but don't order me around like an animal."

"You little fool." He was suddenly brusque and impatient. "This is the only decent thing I've done in my life and this is no public function. This is operation rub-out and I happen to be the blot."

She paled but she had always been quick. "You, of all people? I can hide you for a while but you must know they'll find you sooner or later."

He stared at her, suddenly lost for words. "You'd hide me?"

"Why, yes. Isn't that why you came to me--for help?"

Rickman felt a sudden burning sensation at the back of his eyes. She'd do that for him after all he'd--

"I'm running." Emotion made his voice strangely harsh. "True to type I'm running like a rabbit but I came to pick you up as I ran."

"Pick me up--why?"

"Oh God!" He was suddenly distraught. "Do I have to remind you what they did to Fray's wife or how Menekin's mistress ended up?"

She opened her mouth, her eyes strangely misted, then turned quickly.

"You've changed, haven't you? I can see it as well as feel it." Her voice was controlled, practical and without emotion. "I have felt and experienced certain changes within myself but I never expected--" She turned to face him again. "Thank you, even if we failed, you remembered me. When do we go?"

"Better not make it more than an hour, less if you can."

"All we need is food, a dozen proto-cubes should last us weeks."

He exhaled smoke. "You're taking this very calmly."

"No." Her eyes were suddenly misted again. "No, not calmly, gratefully, perhaps desperately. I thought it was all over. I thought I should never see you again. No, don't look like that, please. I'm not being possessive nor demanding. It's just that you cared enough to come. It's just that you remembered me." She smiled faintly but without bitterness. "It's been rather lonely. Security wives have no friends. We cannot console ourselves with a lover. Only a madman would make a pass at a Director's woman."

She closed the small case she had begun to pack. "I'm ready."

"Fine." He turned towards the window and his muscles seemed to lock into painful paralysis.

A security flyer was just landing in the small park beside his own machine.

Chapter Eighteen

RICKMAN TURNED SLOWLY back from the window, his face pale.

"Gelda, I'm afraid we're too late. We've got company." He was filled suddenly with the memories of a half forgotten love. "God, I'm sorry, darling, damn sorry."

"How many?" Her voice was still calm.

"In that flyer probably two but don't delude yourself. They'll be picked hatchet men."

"Are you going to give in now?" It was a direct question and there was no challenge in her voice.

"I hadn't thought--hell--no, I'm damned if I am." He was filled with a strange sense of purpose. "They think they know me. They think I'll bluster, threaten and finally go on my knees. They'd like that but they're not going to get it." He made an abrupt gesture. "There's a gun in the wall-shelf of the cocktail bar, get it, hide it and if I go down--" He stopped, not quite sure how to continue, then, pleadingly, "Don't let them get you alive, Gelda, please."

She looked at him with a strange expression in her eyes which awoke a curious response in himself.

"I won't. I promise you."

He nodded and looked quickly through the window; two men were already skirting the swimming pool and approaching the front door.

Trudy and Valance! Rickman felt a sinking sensation in his stomach, against those two he stood less chance than a trussed rabbit.

Desperately he fought down a rising panic, dropped into the nearest chair and tried to look relaxed. They would not shoot him out of hand, not through the back nor as he rose from the chair. Trudy and Valance were artists, sadistic gourmets and they'd want their fun, particularly with a top line ex-director.

The door slid open--all doors opened for Security men-- and they stepped inside.

Trudy was lean, tight-jawed, neatly dressed; one of his slightly protruding teeth pushed down his lower lip at the corner giving him a permanent sneer. Valance was short, jerky of movement, wooden-faced, blank-eyed and petulant.

"Sorry to disturb you, Director." Trudy's polite sneer was at its evil best.

"Why, hello, boys." Rickman was surprised at his own calm. "Is this something important?"

"You bet." Valance hopped from one foot to the other as if he had temporarily lost his balance and only just regained it. "And you're it, Rickman. You're the important one."

"I am?" He was trembling inside but he managed to look suitably blank and obtuse. Then he smiled. "This is a joke, eh? Ha, Dowd, I'll bet. Not the first time he's pulled a gag like this." He chuckled convincingly and stretched, thrusting his hands deep into his pockets.

"Yes, yes, a joke." Trudy's cackle was high and thin like that of an old man. "Only Dowd isn't playing this one-- we are."

"That so?" Rickman looked blank and vaguely apprehensive.

"Something up?"

Trudy cackled again and leaned forward. "I'll say. You're right on the button, Director."

It was then that Rickman raised his arm and fired through his pocket.

Trudy was still leaning forward when the charge hit him and he staggered uncertainly. An expression of terrified disbelief filled his face briefly then his muscles went limp. He fell, slowly and jerkily like a puppet, like something supported by strings which were slowly being severed.

There was a blackened hole in the center of his chest and, as his body struck the floor, a grotesque puff of black smoke was ejected from his open mouth.

Rickman tried to swing round but he stood no chance. Valance was shocked but his reflexes were as quick as ever. A gun was in his hand with terrifying quickness but he never fired it.

There was the rasping report of an energy weapon and Valance toppled backwards, his head a blackened cinder.

Rickman jerked from the chair and spun round. "Gelda!" He caught her as she fainted and carried her to the studio couch. The gun from behind the cocktail bar was still clutched tightly in her hand.

He forced whisky between her lips and chafed her hands desperately.

"Gelda, Gelda darling, wake up."

Slowly her eyelids flickered open and she looked up at him. "I couldn't let him kill you, not--not now that I've found you again."

God, he thought suddenly ashamed, she's still in love with me. She's never stopped. And she saved my life. She killed Valance.

He said brusquely, "Come, we've got to get out of here."

"Of course." She rose, pale and unsteady but obviously clear-headed.

"We'd better take my flyer. It's out at the front."

"Yes." He nodded quickly. "I'll pre-set my own flyer to take off in an hour. No one will worry about Trudy and Valance for some time. They like to enjoy their fun." He hurried from the house and was back in less than a minute. "Let's go." He gripped her hand and almost pulled her from the house.

The parked vehicle which belonged to his wife was a luxury craft but fortunately discreet in appearance. He was glad he had insisted on a four-contact receptor. If they wanted to bring him down by cutting the beam they would have to bring down about a third of the normal air traffic as well.

He took the craft away slowly, close to the roof, and dropped skillfully into the block rise-shaft. At express level he pressed the craft to twenty miles short of absolute maximum and held it there. The flyer was fast. The city seemed to fall back and diminish to toylike size in a matter of seconds.

He fumbled in his pockets and produced a cigar. "So far, so good."

She said, practically. "Where are we going? We must be going somewhere."

"There's only one place we can go and that's to the D.A."

"We shall be safe there?"

"I think you will, Gelda. I don't think they'll take it out on you."

Her eyes filled with tears. "Meaning that there's little hope for you."

"Look, Gelda, let's face facts, there's nowhere else to go. Wherever we try to hide, they'll find us. In another community, a people with some kind of principles won't punish the innocent." .

"But you--"

Rickman puffed smoke. "From their point of view I'm a war criminal, but I'm giving myself up voluntarily. I don't suppose I'll get more than a funeral oration but, perhaps, if the Gods are kind, I'll get a life sentence. In any case, it's our only hope."

She nodded, her face pale. "Which way are we going?"

"The way they won't expect--across the African continent. We'll take our time, hole up in daylight, and half bury the flyer in sand. Maybe it will work and maybe we'll lose them. They're in no position to send out special patrols. Too many people are breaking out as it is."

She looked up at him. "Sitting here beside you it's hard to believe that less than four hours ago I had no idea-- It's strange, I sensed the change in you even before you spoke. Oh, you looked younger but that means nothing. It was something I sensed inside you as if you'd found yourself."

He smiled, tilting his head at an angle, the cigar jutting from the corner of his mouth. "See that? Remember how I used to do that? Good picture, good publicity--that's about all I found, Gelda, a public picture."

"You're more than that."

"Perhaps now, I've managed to put something there, not much, perhaps just a few seeds but something."

"You have changed, haven't you?"

"Yes and sometimes I don't quite understand it. Why have I changed and not Kaft or Dowd, why not--" He stopped, frowning. "I didn't have it--my God, I didn't have it." He turned towards her. "There was a specially prepared serum when the plague started. I refused it, but it was given to all security and official personnel. It might, or might not, have been extended to others but the plague died out and no one bothered.

Everyone I know, including you, who escaped the injection, seems to be undergoing some sort of change, but the rest--I wonder what's happening to the rest?"

The last few hundred miles were the worst and Rickman tried to force the growing tension from his mind. He glanced at Gelda sleeping beside him and sighed. She, too, had or was it that he saw her in a different light? Dimly he remembered he had once loved and desired her more than anything in the world. She was, he recalled, the only woman who had ever made him feel like a man. Never been a man, had he?

He thought bitterly that it was a shame he was probably going to his death. Something had grown up between them, a responsive something that-- God, he was in love with her again, wasn't he? It was strange when you came to think about it that he hadn't touched her even when they'd holed-up in the desert for two days. It was not that he hadn't desired her.

It was just that he seemed to have developed sensitivity. He hadn't wanted the frantic desperate copulation of a hunted beast. He'd wanted-- God, he had changed, hadn't he?

His thoughts began to creep back to the present and he forced them elsewhere. It was not too difficult. A great deal had happened in the few days they'd been on the run--that ship, for example.

They'd found it hidden between two enormous sand dunes in the center of the African continent. A long, alien vessel which had been curiously familiar and, suddenly, he had remembered. It resembled the ship Statten had shown them, the radar photograph. At the time he had thought "another bunch of blasted aliens."

Despite an inward terror and fear of possible pursuit, an even greater fear had forced him down to take a look. He'd had the inner certainty that unless he investigated for himself a supernatural fear would break his nerve completely. There was no natural explanation for this belief but it had been too strong to dispute.

He had landed behind the biggest dune and approached the alien cautiously and on foot with the gun ready in his hand.

A hundred yards from the ship he stumbled over a dead alien. When he reached the ship there were seven more sprawled in varying attitudes round the open port. Cautiously he stepped inside but the ninth and last alien was also quite dead. He sat upright in a high-backed padded recoil chair and a bank of instruments in front of him clicked and made chuckling sounds in a kind of regular order.

Rickman had the impression it was some sort of sub-space radio and functioning automatically. Perhaps it had been sending a warning--the alien's last dying act. It could easily have been a warning: "Danger--don't come. Danger--don't come." Yes, it might

well be something as factual as that.

Outside he had studied the bodies and he saw that they had been dead only a short time. There was no visible cause, no wounds, no charred holes from energy weapons but their postures had been the postures of agony.

They looked as if they had died of some swift and terrible disease.

He paused and studied one of the creatures before he returned to the flyer. The alien was humanoid but blue. He had a stunted, bow-legged, heavily muscled body and the sharp fanged face of a hairless dog. There was something about the thing which made Rickman shudder. The Vrenka, by comparison were off-beat but nearly benevolent.

Gelda stirred beside him and awoke. "Are we getting close now?"

"A hundred and eight miles." He was tired and his eyes felt gritty and hot.

"Do you think we'll get through?"

"We might. Patrols were not increased as Kaft thought it might give forewarning of his proposed attack."

"Do you think it will succeed?"

"If it doesn't, he's had it. The whole structure of his regime is falling apart at the seams."

She said, simply, "I'm glad. I hope he fails, now that you're out. Strange, a week ago--well, I thought you were like him."

"Perhaps, once, I was. No, that's wrong, Kaft is a lot of things but not

a coward. I was always a coward, I clung to that bunch because I felt safe.

As a matter of brutal fact I am still a coward but I can think apart from it."

"I know." Her voice was quite detached. "I know because I feel as you feel. It isn't exactly telepathy. It's a sort of emotional response."

"I think I know what you mean."

"You should because you should be feeling it, too." She paused as if seeking words. "The whole world is changing, particularly for lovers." She sighed. "I have the strange feeling that there have never been lovers but only viewers, would-be lovers who saw the promised land from afar but never reached it. Sowers of dreams who saw the bright flowers wither away before they could grow to beauty."

Rickman nodded and realized that a few years ago her words would have seemed affected and completely meaningless. He remembered now that Gelda read and collected books. Printed books such as had existed before the reader-screen replaced the newspaper and periodical. Most of those books had been poetry books, a subject which might well have been a suspect and alien language for all it had meant to him then.

He realized abruptly that to him alone it was still meaningless but that he could understand and respond to it through her. God, he was beginning to understand. They were growing together, gaining a clearer and wider picture of the world through each other's faculties. Separated they would only be half-things...

She said, softly, "Yes--yes." As if he had said the words aloud. Then, wistfully, "We had to wait so long."

"Think of all the generations who died and never reached it." He paused, then said in a low voice, "There's the coast ahead, only a few more minutes."

"I'm frightened, I think I'm frightened for both of us. Must we go on?"

"I've told you, dear, there's nowhere else to go and, one thing, these people obviously have principles. They could have struck first and bargained afterwards. In all probability that one blow would have been enough."

"What will you say to them?"

"What can I say to them? Although I was not, at the time, directly responsible, I supported the people who buried them alive. My record isn't pretty."

"Can't you bargain with them?"

Rickman shook his head. "No thanks. Betrayal is not my currency anymore. Although there is something they must know about counter-propaganda."

"I don't follow you dear."

"They're not getting battle plans or time and date of the proposed assault, but I have to tell them this other thing--" Rickman stopped, frowning. "I don't suppose they'll be able to do anything even then, but you never know. Perhaps with Duncan's help--"

"You know Duncan, don't you?"

"I've met him. He always frightened me to death. Nothing I could lay my finger on. Just something he sort of "gave off", vitality, intellect. God knows. Of course, he was never so bad as Kaft painted him. He

never started the plague for example, although that yarn was put around a good deal. I don't think there's any doubt, however, that Duncan is here on some sort of mission. Maybe it's a good mission. Perhaps if I had not been so frightened I might have backed it, but as it was then I wanted him killed. Looking back, my terror was completely emotional, even superstitious. In my mind, Duncan was a kind of alien bogey-man, towering even above the entire Administration and I felt we had a tiger by the tail." He smiled faintly. "It looks as if we had, but we damn soon let go.

Kaft, of all people should have known better than play games with a superman." Rickman paused. "What are you thinking?"

She looked up, smiling. "I was listening, my dear. It just struck me suddenly that you'd missed something, something about Duncan which, perhaps, only a woman would sense."

"You don't know him."

"I've seen enough of him on news items, darling, to realize one important thing." She hesitated, slightly. "This may shake you a little, dear, you see--Duncan isn't exactly a man."

Chapter Nineteen

"YOUR NAME?" Sebastian barely glanced up from the papers before him.

"Rickman--Arthur Rickman."

"Mr. Rickman, you were number four in the Administration political structure. Why did you run away?"

"They were going to kill me."

"Why run here? You must have known you would face charges of crimes against humanity."

"Yes, I did but I thought you would spare my wife."

Sebastian looked up, his face thoughtful. "That was your sole reason?"

"That coupled with the fact that there was nowhere else to go."

"May I question him?" Rickman recognized Duncan's voice and shivered slightly. This would make a normal cross examination look like--

"Mr. Rickman, some three months ago the Administration and all security officers were given a preventative against the plague. Were you included?"

"No, I refused."

"On what grounds?"

"It's difficult. Call it part hunch, part cowardice. I suspected that the serum was a rush job and had not been fully tested. I disliked the idea of something mutated in my bloodstream."

"Thank you, that will be all."

"Mr. Rickman." Sebastian pushed the papers to one side. "Had you arrived here a year ago you would have been tried and executed within three days. Now, however, the world is changing and the evidence in our possession suggests that you are changing with it. You will, therefore, be brought before a psychiatric examining board headed by Mr. Duncan. If the findings of that board confirm your change we shall wipe the slate clean. We shall give you a fresh start, your past crimes will be erased from the records and you will be an absolute discharge."

"Discharge?" Rickman stared at him dully and had the sudden conviction he was going to faint. He fought against it desperately, while faces blurred and the room seemed to rock from side to side. At a great distance he heard Sebastian's voice continuing--

"In the new age and in the new order we judge a man not by crimes committed in the past, because in the past he was insane. What we must ask ourselves is whether that man is still insane or has he, like the world, stepped forward into sanity."

Finally the voice stopped. Rickman overcame his weakness and forced himself erect. "I did not expect this. I expected execution, you would have been right to execute--" He stopped helplessly. "Perhaps I would have pleaded. I don't know. I might have traded, but I had nothing to trade. I can give no dates, no plans, nothing that would have bought my life." He paused frowning. "They're in a bad way, you know. The whole structure is toppling and they're desperate." He looked at Duncan. "Some day this week you're going to lead a

commando raid on Camp Six to release the hostages. It won't be you, of course, but they'll say it was. They're that desperate."

"What effect will that have on normal events?" Sebastian was leaning forward, frowning.

"The hostages will be shot to pieces, of course, but some programmed robots have been constructed to resemble the Vrenka exactly. These same robots will be permitted to run amuck in the city and Mr. Duncan will be made responsible. It's a propaganda measure to swing public opinion away from Duncan before the population explodes into rebellion. Kaft is prepared to sacrifice five thousand innocent people to stop the riot. They'll be torn to pieces by these alleged Vrenka."

"Thank you, Mr. Rickman." Sebastian smiled faintly. "You have done us a great service. Perhaps you would like to tell your wife the good news."

When he had gone, Sebastian said, "We must stop this. Not only are innocent lives to be sacrificed needlessly, but we have moral obligations to the future and our ex-enemy."

Duncan grinned. "We have the space cruiser Boston also, which is almost as big as Camp Six. If we're quick we could beat them to the punch."

"Excellent. We could bring forward our own propaganda speech and undermine the whole thing anyway." Sebastian was beginning to sound excited and boyish. "With luck we can get the whole business going within the hour. While I'm speaking the Boston can go in, pull out our ex-enemies and..."

"Ready, sir?" The technician stood ready with his finger on the

switch.

"I'm ready." Sebastian watched the other depress the switch, smiled almost boyishly and faced the microphone.

"Attention, please. This is Paul Sebastian, elected mayor of the free community in sector Brit."

In thirty cities throughout the world, concealed micro-units on a myriad of wave-lengths received and amplified the words. They were concealed in crevices, air conditioner units, public service vehicles and there was no escape from them.

For five minutes Administration technicians fought desperately to jam the broadcast but finally gave up in despair. Some of the micro-units were recorders and they, in their turn, repeated the message later. Altogether the entire speech was repeated five times and ninety-eight per cent of the population heard it.

"I am speaking to the enslaved, but freedom loving, people of the entire world. Attention please. At eight A.M. on the first day of this week a space vessel landed secretly in this sector. The Captain and his entire crew of officers and men voluntarily placed themselves, and their ship, at the disposal of this community. The Captain was John D. Radnor and the ship was the cruiser Boston."

"One hour later this vessel was joined by the Tearaway, the Janero and the capital ship Deutschland captained respectively by Thomas Zimmer, Mark Halsey and Donald Switzer. May I remind the peoples of the world that the capital ship Cosmos and the second cruiser squadron are light-years away and cannot get back in less than eight weeks. The four remaining capital ships, together with sixteen cruisers are out of commission or undergoing extensive overhaul--"

Sebastian paused meaningfully. "And this, gentlemen of the armed services, is the exact position in a proposed assault which, your news services assure you, is a minor police action. However, my reason for speaking to you was not for propaganda purposes but something far more important. The Administration may, as it boasts, rub us out like a bug, but their triumph would be short-lived. For this government and all it stands for, the tides are running out. Night is coming and for them there is no dawn. The entire world is changing and they must change with it or be swept away forever."

"Already, hundred of millions listening to my words, know the world is changing. Already these same millions are aware of a new clarity of mind and the strange ability to reason uninfluenced by emotion. To all comes a new vitality and even to the aged a fresh lease of life. New meanings and new interpretations exist in the relationship between man and woman, and the word "unity" has new meaning."

"You have perceived these changes and in this, my first broadcast to an entire people, I hope to explain them both in cause and effect."

"The change is not in man alone but is taking place throughout the entire structure of all living matter. Mother nature is putting her house in order and all living things are finding their true purpose in an exact order."

"Consult, if you wish, your medics and biologists. They will confirm my words on one point alone. Today, in the human bloodstream, are micro-organisms which, a scant year ago, would have caused a painful and violent death. As the days pass, the operation of a functioning nature will become more and more apparent. Nature was never intended to be divided against itself. It was designed as a functioning co-operative unit but it was forced to near chaos and self-destruction by external forces which might have eventually destroyed it completely."

Behind the microphones Sebastian paused, sipped water, inhaled quickly at an already lighted cigarette and began speaking again.

"Do not imagine for one moment that these changes are confined to man and microscopic life. In this world's remaining jungles the vegetation is both changing its appearance and purpose. Incredulous observers report that carnivores are to be seen devouring the thick broad leaves of a hitherto unknown plant. Tests of these same leaves give a basic protein reading far higher than the creatures chosen as a natural prey."

"The fact that these same jungles are spreading outwards at incredible speed of three feet a day shows that nature is ready herself for new demands and a new dispensation."

"A few days ago some of our own observers made a brief study of the African continent and here, too, were visible changes. In some spots coarse grass was appearing, usually close to the banks of the ancient waterways. More astounding still was one deserted section of the coastline where-"a small green flowerless shrub with wirelike vines appeared to be doing distillation jobs."

Sebastian paused and sucked alight a cigarette. "These plants were drawing in sea water, removing the salt for their own nutrition and passing back the fresh water into the desert. Already ponds and in some cases lakes were beginning to form."

He paused again deliberately. "The deserts are being pushed back.

Chaos gives way to order. Let us look at that chaos before we leave it behind forever."

"Consider the senseless waste and the equally senseless savagery to which we once glibly referred to as "the laws of nature." Under

these "laws" is every creature which lived, fought against or devoured each other. On this battlefield, man, the dominant life form, walked alone and, throughout this world, was hated. Only in rare cases--the dog was a notable example--did man and another life-form have a dim realization of some sort of reciprocal tie between all living creatures. Other creatures knew, of course. It was part of their inherent structure to know, but that knowledge was inhibited by external pressure."

"Strangely, only one class of living creatures managed to fulfill their exact purpose and became, in consequence, virtual pariahs. These were the parasites. These creatures were fulfilling their purpose completely. The trouble was, however, that their unfortunate hosts didn't know about it.

They didn't know that the association should be complementary--that rare co-operation and interdependence between life forms which science calls symbiosis. Upon this word "symbiosis" rests the entire structure of the new order and I am going to try and put it before you in simple words."

"We all know, that despite chaos, the human body tried to function as a single unit. Although this same body often divided against itself and was compelled to divert a prodigious amount of energy defending itself against outside attack, nonetheless every living cell tried to work for the benefit of the whole. True order should be like this with every life form working together for the greater good."

Again Sebastian paused for long seconds. "True order is a complete symbiosis of all nature with man at the peak, just as the brain is the peak or natural fulfillment of the functioning human body."

"In this new order the human mechanism need no longer maintain a vast army of aggressive cells to resist hostile invasion. The micro-

organisms which once threatened his life now work with his body to maintain its functions. Consequently, man enters a new estate in which his life expectation may be measured not in years but in centuries."

"As I have tried to stress, all life is interdependent and mutually beneficial one to the other. As the years pass man will begin to see not only his dependence upon, but his responsibility to the entire structure of nature. Just as, in the previous analogy, the human brain protects and functions through its body so will man protect yet function through nature."

To the listening world there was a long pause then Sebastian said, "It seems even on the brink of a new era there are those who would turn back the clock or, ironically, stand on the shore and order the changing of the tides. I have just learned that orders have been given for an all-out assault on this community. This is the last throw of a dying order, the weak but desperate gesture engendered by a succession of dismal failures. Perhaps this gesture will mean the end of this society, but nothing the Administration can do can change the tides. Order condemns them, the world condemns them and even an ex-enemy snatched from their savage prison today and carried by us to safety can only turn from them with revulsion for these are no longer human."

Faintly and far away the listening world heard the clangor of the alarms, but Sebastian continued to speak.

The Administration technicians had done their best but several hundred thousand micro-robotics relaying the message on hundreds of different wave lengths were beyond their powers.

Kaft realized that there was only one hope left. After the attack on Camp Six which had snatched the Vrenka hostages from under his

nose, his only hope was to wipe out the opposition forever.

He overruled Statten, picked his main assault groups and wrote an epitaph after their names long before they reached the fighting--they were expendable.

The assault was divided into two sections and scheduled for precise tasks under the code names of "Bludgeon" and "Cardiac."

Bludgeon was the main group and intended, as the name suggested, to crush the opposition by sheer weight of numbers and material.

Kaft was quite certain it would fail. Operation Bludgeon would lose him a million men, perhaps more, but it might spell the success of Cardiac. No diversions or feints for Kaft, none of the subtler skills of strategy but a gigantic all-out assault to hide the real aim--Cardiac.

He began the attack with an armada of aircraft, troop-freighters and strato-flyers.

A hundred miles from the target, however, one tenth of this force had become many converging lines of wreckage. The orbiting spacecraft, highly accurate in precision gunnery, were taking an appalling toll of the invasion force.

Kaft, watching the progress of the assault from his underground stronghold was, however, unperturbed. He had expected losses; he had expected near-massacre. With a strong space fleet backing the defenders, the losses were bound to be high.

The insurgent's deflector screen was, however, something of a shock. He had anticipated resistant devices, even a major force screen but not a gimmick which blew his own fire-power back in his face.

The mass discharge of energy weapons which, in a matter of seconds, should have pushed back and burned out the generators of any force screen known to science, simply gushed sideways in a mushroom of blue-white flame. Four wings, or eight hundred and twenty-two aircraft, were caught in that gout of diverted energy. In one second an entire section of sky was black with aircraft; the next only some wisps of grey smoke and a few falling fragments showed that they had ever existed.

Cardiac, however, went well. The compact force of picked specialist and trained fanatics landed without loss just beyond the deflector screen and immediately went into action.

The new energy borers rolled out of their transports, whined shrilly and began to sink into the ground like mechanical moles. Cooling devices followed and the assault units poured down the resulting tunnels.

Within seven minutes they were through to the first level and fighting their way down a secondary tunnel opposed only by light forces which they pushed back quickly by sheer weight of numbers and a horrific disregard for losses.

Cardiac knew exactly where it was going and the tall security major in command wore a thin sneer of satisfaction. "Another few hundred yards down, Lieutenant, and we'll have the bastards on their knees. They'll be guarding special installations, naturally, but we're after something bigger, better and more vulnerable. Experts have been taking sonic checks on this place for months and they located the main shelter. Once we hold that, we can squeeze them into submission. This place is equipped to house four thousand adults and six times that number of children. Once taken I shall warn the entire community that for every shot fired against government forces

will mean the death of one woman and three children." He paused and sighed. "Be damn glad when this business is over, I feel so damn tired--"

Ahead of them the assault forces had reached a wider tunnel with a number of small openings on either side. Resistance appeared to be weakening and counter fire inaccurate.

Combat inexperience, fanaticism and the excitement of pursuit led the advancing troops past these smaller openings on a wave of exalted over-confidence. They were security police, not combat troops and were drugged with early success. This was a push-over. They'd have this little business tied up in less than twenty minutes. More than four hundred men had gone forward before something green reached from the first opening and caught one of the running men as he went past. The green things lifted him high and flung him against the opposite wall.

More waving green things appeared in an opening on the opposite side of the tunnel. One swung at a man's head and decapitated him bloodily.

In the immediate vicinity morale wavered. Four more Vrenka appeared and it snapped completely. Few of the men had fought in the war and were psychologically ill-equipped to deal with the aliens. They fired wildly, panicked and tried to retreat. They were immediately shot down by their own officers as an example but it was too late. Already panic-stricken men were shouting "Vrenka!" and the tunnels echoed to the word.

The forward units which had run into stiff opposition and were suffering heavy casualties realized abruptly that the aliens were behind them and morale crumpled completely. Within six seconds the entire force was in hopeless chaos. Hundreds were fighting to

get out while groups of ruthless experts shot down the retreating men in an effort to get the attack going again...

Chapter Twenty

IN THE STRONGHOLD Kaft sighed and snapped off the viewing screen. "We've lost." His voice was factual.

"We've barely started." Statten was shrill.

"The enemy has barely started." Kaft leaned back, his face expressionless. "Cardiac has been blunted and we'll never get it rolling again."

"You should have let me handle this." Statten looked shriveled and accusing.

Kaft shrugged. "It was a gesture. Victory could never have been exploited."

"I don't follow you at all, what--"

"You never have been able to reason, have you?" Kaft made a reproving noise in his throat. "Always the thinking is left to me. Always I must add the column of figures." He' leaned forward. "You know as well as I that we confirmed that alien ship on the African desert. You also listened to the enemy broadcast. You heard but were too lazy to follow up with a little reasoning." He leaned forward and touched a switch. "I suggest you listen to that part again--"

There was a faint hissing sound. Then Sebastian's voice filled the room:

"Just as the human body once mobilized to protect itself against outside invasion so, today, does the entire structure of nature mobilize to repel invasion from out-world life-forms whose

emanations are pronouncedly hostile."

"In proof of this claim, less than a week ago an alien vessel of unknown origin landed in the center of the African continent. This vessel was obviously an advanced scout for an invasion fleet and it was treated as such. The crew left their craft for preliminary survey but survived only a few hours. When they were found they were past help, they had been destroyed not by the weapons of man but by the forces of nature."

"This, it may now be told, is the secret of the Mattrain worlds. A solar system wherein the true order of nature has existed since the inception of life. An order of complete symbiosis with all nature functioning in unity like the parts of a perfectly contrived mechanism. The same integral functioning of nature as it applies to Mattrain is being brought to pass on this planet now--"

Kaft leaned forward and cut the speech. "Well?"

"I don't like it." Dowd began to pace up and down. "It makes near sense and that's more frightening than fantasy."

"You can add near sense as you call it and reach a total-would you care to check?" Kaft smiled thinly and held up a thin pink hand. "Let us take one point at a time." He extended a finger. "The world is changing perhaps, or perhaps not due to the causes Sebastian states."

"You don't believe this fantasy?" Statten's voice was more frightened than challenging.

"I face facts, Statten, and there are more in my possession than in yours." He sighed. "For example, programing no longer "takes" and those already programed threw off its effects. Elgin, our local

director, was torn to pieces by a crowd of misshapen people who, although still twisted with pain, were not feeling enough to hold them back."

"Is that why Ralston shot himself?" Dowd turned in the act of helping himself to a stiff brandy.

"Not quite." Kaft shook his head slowly. "I don't know it all. Apparently he ran into Hengist when the enemy raided Camp Six. As you know they were old enemies but Hengist took no revenge. Later that day Ralston went berserk and had to be destroyed by his own men. He kept shouting, 'I can't stand his damn pity.' "

"What was he shouting that for?" Dowd gulped down the brandy.

"I don't know but I can draw my own conclusions." Kaft sounded remote. "Ralston sensed what was going to happen to him."

"Heroic." Dowd's voice sounded slurred.

"Hitting it, aren't you?" Statten's voice was harsh and accusing. "I should have thought at a time like this--"

"Don't push me, General." Dowd was already dialing for another drink.

"In the first place I'm liable to hang one on you and, in the second, I feel too God damn sick to care."

"Have you seen a medic?"

"What time have any of us had for anything like that?" Dowd gulped at the liquor and sighed. "I suppose I should really; I ache all over and my hands and feet feel numb. Can't feel my right hand to be honest. It looks all right but--" He broke the sentence to raise the glass and

drain it.

"Careful, Dowd, careful." Statten sounded alarmed. "Alcohol could be an outright poison if you're really sick."

"Save it. Nothing can make any difference." Kaft sounded detached.

"What'n hell do you mean by that?"

"I told you, Dowd, near-sense figures add up to a total."

Dowd scowled, dialed another drink and said, "Add 'em."

"You'll admit to certain visible changes."

"Yes--er--yes."

"Rickman changed?"

"Hell, yes, that was too damn obvious."

"In short, everyone changed but us. Now we have to ask ourselves why."

"What!" Statten half rose.

"It's simple enough, General. There was a plague and we had an injection. That injection cut us off from change, shut the door with us on the outside. We're like dead branches on a young tree. We're being disposed of because we don't belong. We're in exactly the same position as those alien scouts but the process is slower."

"You're mad." Statten's voice sounded as if something inside it had rusted.

Kaft shrugged. "I could be but I don't think I am. That is why I said we could never exploit victory. The entire security force was given the injection. You cannot hold down conquered territory with dying men."

"We must do something." Statten was shrill. "We must have treatment, we must get Conner and--"

Kaft cut him short. "Conner is dead, very dead indeed. I am not the only man capable of adding figures, you know. Someone else arrived at the same total before me. Conner and his entire staff were shot to pieces in the laboratory. Presumably someone went there for assurances and didn't get them."

"What the devil did we launch the attack for?" Statten looked bemused.

"Why not?" Kaft shrugged. "One does not surrender to fate without a fight."

"You sound very calm." Statten was obviously controlling himself with considerable effort. "You have more or less stated we're doomed--don't you care?"

"I pride myself on being a realist, General. This is not the end I would have chosen but there are compensations. I rejected perhaps several hundred years of life--Duncan, I remember, offered me a thousand--but there was a price. Rickman, you will remember underwent personality changes. We might have gone the same way. One thousand years as changed men, General, one thousand years to recall our mistakes and remember that we lost an empire. A thousand years to live and see others use the power and authority which was ours. Speaking for myself, gentlemen, no thank you."

"But we're going to die." Statten's eyes seemed to bulge.

"You've got a point there." Dowd's voice was thick and uncertain. "I applaud Kaft's viewpoint. There are com--compensations in death but giving in is another thing." He began to dial for another drink. "We run back to our underground stronghold like rats down a hole but odd, this is an operational headquarters not a tomb. Drunk or sober I'm not going to sit down and die."

"You'll sit and watch yourself rot." Kaft said it almost casually.

"Yow may." Dowd turned unsteadily from the auto-serve and banged his fist heavily on the table. "There are other medics, other laboratories, other opinions. I don't give in, I don't give way, I don't--" He became suddenly conscious that they were not listening to him. "What's the matter? What are you staring at? Answer me! Do you hear? I'm not--"

He stopped. Sweat beaded his forehead but he did not panic. He seemed to be held in stasis, strangely shut from feeling or emotion--

With a kind of frozen calm he leaned forward, picked up the little finger of his right hand and dropped it into the disposal slot...

Duncan did not hear the door open but he sensed that someone was in the room and turned quickly.

"Martha!"

"Yes. Martha." She paused to suck alight a cigarette. "The clinic discharged me today with blessings. It's a fine thing I must spend my first hours out of bed looking for my man."

"Martha, please. This is not a simple issue, you must understand--"

"That you're not a man?"

He paled. "You knew?"

"My dear, you're the expert on all these newly functioning faculties. Of course I knew and, no, it doesn't matter."

"You're twenty-eight and I'm--"

"Sixteen--seventeen?"

He flushed. "Under the slower processes of the new order--about seventeen."

She put her arms around his neck. "We marry at seventeen even on earth you know."

"I'm a kid, Martha. I'm gauche, ignorant, inexperienced and I've never known a woman intimately in my life."

She pressed her lips to his cheek. "It's about time you did, Peter." Her face was suddenly flushed. "Hold me close, darling, hold me close--"

Outside Gaynor turned and winked. "Well, that seems to be that. I suppose one day he'll remember that I'm the only visitor that lock would respond to."

Estelle squeezed his arm. "I knew you'd help. She seemed so lost when I met her."

Slowly they began to walk back. Round the next corner they met a Vrenka heading in the opposite direction. The alien carried a small blackboard which it immediately extended. On it was printed "Good day to you." There was a scratching sound and the words "Mr. Gaynor" were abruptly appended.

Gaynor grinned and said, "Good day and thank you."

When they were out of earshot he laughed. "Even our ex-enemies are becoming respectable."

She smiled up at him. "I was frightened when I first saw them. I think a lot of people were, but general opinion has changed."

He laughed. "Blame the kids for that. They seem to think they're some sort of toy."

"Don't you think the mayor took an awful chance letting them loose?"

"I thought about that myself but, after long consideration, no. As the mayor explained in his speech, a changing nature would destroy an outworlder whose emanations were hostile. I think the fact of their survival proved their attitude and, at the same time, whatever happened in nature must have effected them also. If we can think more clearly so, no doubt, can they." He laughed' again and shook his head. "I must confess it shook me rigid when I first saw a crowd of children playing maypoles with one in Hyde Park."

"They're very gentle, somehow. They don't even look violent anymore."

He sighed. "I don't think the Vrenka, as a race, has ever been as violent as man. They became violent only when they thought we meant to destroy.

Any creature will become violent if its life is threatened."

"You have strong feelings about this, haven't you?"

"Very strong, one day survival may depend on the cooperation of all intelligent life-forms no matter what their appearance." He paused,

frowning. "I can understand a lot now. I can understand why the Mattrain stood apart and refused to help. You don't give weapons to the insane. If they had tried to help us directly we should probably have regarded it as an act of aggression. Fortunately fate provided the solution, they sent back Duncan as negotiator and superman."

"Yes," said Estelle softly. "Only he's not a superman now, not at this moment--"

"I made you happy and, if I couldn't see it in your eyes, I should still know because you're part of me now."

"And you of me." He kissed her. "You know, Martha, long before I saw you on that educational programme, long before I fell in love with you I used to look at this planet and shudder. All around me was beauty and, on this, my home world was nothing but ugliness. Although I had been educated to understand the causes, I was still shocked by what I saw and a very necessary, part of my education ie torture." He sighed and shook his head, they are -- immensely tall but they move with indescribable grace.

Their marriages never failed while Earth's seldom endured. It was like looking down from heaven into hell. It was almost a relief when they told me I could do something about it." He sighed again. "It had to be done, you know. Another hundred years and there would have been no human race."

She touched his cheek with her finger tips. "Tell me about it. I have to share it now--remember?"

"I remember." He smiled. "Well, the plague was the beginning, after that there would have been something else and then something else until there was no one left to fight or devise counter serums."

"What stopped the plague?"

"Measures taken against given conditions." He paused and smiled.

"This is right in your field, darling. With degrees in radiology and as an accredited solar physicist you should get this perfectly. What would happen if micro-organisms in a culture tray were subjected to hard radiation?"

She thought about it. "They'd either die or mutate."

He averted his face slightly. "Martha, Earth is the culture tray and the entire planet has been subjected to the influence of hard radiation since the inception of life." He paused. "In the known universe there are countless suns. Most of these suns function perfectly but a small number are defective. We call these defectives "Rogue Suns" and Earth has one of them."

She stiffened, suddenly understanding. "So that's the ancient enemy, our own sun. I should have seen it, Peter, and I've been calling myself a solar physicist."

"Don't blame yourself, dear. You had no subject for comparison just as man had no way of knowing he had been knocked sideways and inverted."

He smiled grimly. "We owe a great deal of sorrow to our ancient enemy.

His radiation has increased the speed of our evolution. As the mayor explained it was on the verge of proving fatal."

"Ours is the kind of prodigal sun for whom no one would kill a fatted calf."

"But what could anyone do about a sun." She looked dazed.

He laughed. "I'm with you. Even the Mattrain have yet to come up with a technique for manipulating a sun. They did, however come up with a simple solution which, although quite beyond my science, I was able to put into effect. The answer was insulation. The Mattrain created a gaseous substance which, when released in quantities, completely cloaked Earth's atmospheric envelope. This gas kept out the dangerous radiations completely and reduced the prodigality to its correct level. As you are beginning to see, Nature, relieved of external pressures, knows her job and is putting her house in order rapidly, although it will be centuries before we reach a true and absolute balance."

"It's miraculous." She lay still for a long time with her face intent and thoughtful. Then she moved closer to him. "This love between us-- it is part of this change?"

His arms tightened about her. "At this moment, at this time, and to me, it is all of it..."

Scanned by Highroller